The Paintings and Prints of Uzo Egonu 20th Century Nigerian Artist

By

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For my seven sisters
and for Liz Small

Abstract

This work is as much about ways of looking at 20th century African art as it is a study of one artist and his work. The central thesis is that 20th century African art cannot be fully comprehended using deterministic frames and rigid categories. It begins by tracing the emergence of new art forms in Africa - Nigeria in particular - especially from the turn of the 19th century, a process underlined not by a capitulation to the cultural domination of colonialism but by a nationalist determination to undermine its ideological bases by disproving the artistic superiority of the white man.

It then looks briefly at the life of Uzo Egonu, the Nigerian painter and printmaker whose work is the focus of the study. To set out a theoretical frame for studying the artist's art, the dissertation posits that a successful appreciation of 20th century African art is possible not by constructing and imposing grand narratives from outside, but by observing closely, systems of reading and appreciation within African societies. It then advances an alternative theory which draws from the Masquerade, a central topos in most African cultures as well as a complex interpretative system. Like the Masquerade, posits this theory, 20th century African art is mutative, fundamentally eclectic, and essentially transgressive, and any tool which ignores this is ineffectual. Also, because the work of art, like the Masquerade, operates on several different levels and defies the linear perspective, no interpretation is absolute. Because art is a masquerading act, reading must

remain speculative and open.

The work offers an appreciation of aspects of Egonu's *oeuvre*, tracing his development of a personal language, his strong sense of community, and the diversity of his production and concerns, demonstrating through these the poverty of current approaches to the study of 20th century African art.

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Preface

The following study was initially intended to be biographical. In the course of the work, however, it became increasingly clear how difficult this line would be. Any study of Egonu at this stage suffers from a number of limitations. The first is the virtual absence of previous discourse on the artist and his work. To initiate such discourse therefore is given to every difficulty identifiable with a pioneering effort. The second and perhaps most cogent, is the artist's very reticent if most affable nature which, in this case, made access to his private documents and certain details about his life and work impossible. In a letter to me dated 19 November 1989 he detailed his predisposition thus:

> I think that there might be a problem regarding answering some of your future questions, if they follow the same pattern as your last. I will not answer questions which are very personal. All my life I have been a loner and cannot suddenly change. I do realise that because of my philosophy my behaviour contributes to my being invincible [sic] in the art scene here.

The conclusion on reasons for his invisibility is contestible, although there is no intention to argue that here. But the letter explains some of the shortcomings of information and detail which may be detected in this study. My limited access to his official corespondence, for instance, was diligently supervised by him. So was access to the drawings and sketches in his private collection.

His health has been another limitation. Not only did his heart troubles in the eighties affect his ability to recollect details, his continuing convalescence also meant that he could not give fully of his time. Not only did all these preclude a serious

biographical work, I believe the study would gain in richness if the situation were otherwise.

Nevertheless, I acknowledge the artist's enormous help as well as his wife's within the limitations enumerated. My appreciation also goes to Obiora Udechukwu, my painting teacher and friend of the artist who recommended me for the Foreign and Commonwealth Office Fellowship which made this study possible. I acknowledge the attention of my programme advisers at the British Council throughout the period of the study. Thanks also to Nike Odediran who helped transcribe some of my conversations with the artist. I have enjoyed friendly yet rigorous supervision under John Picton of the Department of Art and Archaeology. Any failures of scholarship here are mine.

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Chapter One

INTRODUCTION

The story of 20th century African art and artists, like that of every other artistic tradition, is one of significant cultural interaction between peoples across continents and nations which, especially in this century, has been greatly furthered by technological advancements that facilitate the movement of peoples and accessibility of regions and cultures, as well as the political reconfigurations begun centuries ago through occupations and religious invasions and perfected by the machineries of colonisation in the 19th and 20th centuries. Throughout history artistic traditions and cultures in Africa have been shaped not only by the internal dynamics of specific groups but also by the continuous interaction of such groups with others through trade, migrations, invasions, conquests, and political pacts. And this has not been restricted to interaction within the continent but always extended beyond the geographical borders of what today is known as Africa.

It is known that Arab incursions into the hinterlands of Africa and the advent of Islam in the Sudan significantly affected the art and cultures of these regions[1]. On the East coast where contact with the cultures of the middle East and Asia was more pronounced, significant mutations were produced in art and architecture which have carried to the present. In Northern Nigeria much of the original art traditions, due to the hostile pressures and antagonisms of the local Islamic aesthetic forbidding

representation and "idolatry", went into decline. With regard to the cultures and art of the coast, scholars have noted affinities and suggested possible connections with cultures far removed in time and distance. For instance it has been suggested that the art of the Yoruba of the Guinea coast, in several respects, recalls aspects of the ancient art of the Nile valley. The staff of Oranmiyan, prince of Ife and founder of the Edo royal dynasty, has been compared with totemic monoliths of the Pharaonic period in Egypt. Despite traditions, it was not possible until recent finds to place the bronze finds of Igbo Ukwu entirely within the cultural chronology of the Central Igbo, and this has led to suggestions that there could have been strong links with cultures to the north of Nigeria and the Sudan through trade. Whatever hidden ideological implications there may be in these referential suggestions, and however inaccurate they may prove to be with time, the important thrust is that, for millennia, Africa has had influential contact with the outside, reflected not only in social and political forms but also in the material cultures of its groups.

It is tempting, and has indeed been the inclination of the growing scholarship on 20th century African art, to see cultural contact between Africa and the outside only in terms of the encounter with Europe, and thus to ignore precedent and equally remarkable interactions and attribute to the European presence an undue unilateral significance. Although records exist of contacts between the West Coast and Mediterranean civilisations before 500 BC, significant contacts between Europe and Africa other than the North date only to the 15th century, led by the Portuguese. It is believed that Cadamosto of Venice did sail to West Africa around 1455, but contact with the people of the coast was only begun by the Portuguese in the Guinea Coast and in the Congo towards the end of the century. These initial contacts are believed

to have been of a purely commercial nature,[2] although there are records of an unsuccessful Christian mission to the Bight of Benin in 1473[3], swallowed up perhaps by the momentous upheavals of the last years of Oba Ewuare the Great, and a stone church was erected in Mbanza Kongo in 1491 and the King baptised.[4] It is noteworthy too, that when the Portuguese sent a delegation into the Kongo hinterland to meet with the King shortly after their arrival in 1482, they took four Ba Kongo hostage and sent them to Lisbon as surety.[5] In a sense the innocence which scholars hasten to attribute to the early Portuguese ventures may not be very appropriate.

The Mbanza Kongo took to the Portuguese. The King renamed himself and the nobility converted to Christianity, one of the royal princes rising to become the first Bishop of the Congo. An ambassador was sent from the court of the Kongo to that of King John II, and with him a group of young nobility sent "to learn to read and write, and speak Portuguese, and ... become Christian."[6] Soon a school was set up in the capital, renamed San Salvadore, and a missionary reported in 1515 on the progress of the school. With the growing christianisation the arts of the court were affected, changing to accommodate the religious mutations in the kingdom and the initial enthusiasm of the King and the nobility. The crucifix joined the body of icons and would remain there for a long while even after the collapse of the christian mission in the Congo by the 18th century. In other areas of culture a marked change was taking place, perhaps the most significant of which was the growth of a Portuguese-African mulatto population, sired by the more irreverent Portuguese including the clergy.[7] The early, cordial and very close relations between the courts of Kongo and Lisbon encouraged, quite naturally, the development of new tastes,

new values, new forms which, even after the collapse of the church, survived into the period of the Belgium incursion into the region.

On the Guinea Coast the Portuguese established a trade post in Elmina in 1482, and in 1485 a delegation led by John Alfonso d'Alveiro went up the coast to the court of the Oba of the Bini and obtained treaties on trade between the two Kingdoms.[8] Portuguese presence in Benin reached its height, however, under Oba Esigie (circa 1504-1550) when the Kingdom itself reached its apogee. Diplomatic relations were established between Benin and Portugal and an ambassador was despatched to Lisbon. Esigie learnt and spoke Portuguese, and sent one of his sons, Orogbua who succeeded him, to study in Europe. Missionaries and traders were received.[9] The cultural and political effects of co-operation with Portugal gradually dissipated as Benin went into decline after the death of Esigie. His European trained successor could not hold the fortunes of the Kingdom in place, nor could those after him except for a period under Eresonyen and Akenzua in the early 18th century. The result was the eventual fall of 1897.

The most significant survivals from this period, however, are in the art which itself underwent a mutation to register the new spirit of the times. According to the Nigerian artist and theorist Uche Okeke, "the Christian European visual symbol of the cross gained the acceptance of the local artists and craftsmen who incorporated it in their bronze plaques and sculpture in the Oba's palace".[10] The most remarkable and perhaps most successful of these artists is the great plaque sculptor who has come to be known by scholars as "the Master of the Circled Cross".

While this motival incorporation and the appearance of Portuguese figures in the visual chronicles of the kingdom worked fairly within the existing forms and

traditions, a new art for tourists also developed especially in ivory. What have come to be called "the Afro-Portuguese Ivories", are believed to have been commissioned by Portuguese explorers and executed to the clients's specifications rather than within the strict canons of the tradition or the artists's conceptions.[11] The result of this "hybridism" as Fagg describes it, was, in the opinion of many, a subsequent change in the quality of Edo art. In relation to this period, Okeke writes about "the beginning of a new era in Nigerian art, a period marked by the change occasioned by the newly introduced ideas, materials and techniques from the West."[12] However, beside the imagery, and the change in design and professionalism which the intrusion of apparently overreaching patrons brought into the art by imposing their own specifications in the true manner of the tourist, there is no historical evidence that the Portuguese introduced new materials and techniques. Although examples of European graphics were readily available, brought in by the travellers, there is no evidence that this in itself had any significant influence on the form of Edo art, not even on the art of the bronze plaque which is most closely affined to two dimensional art, other than in the weakening of form. Fagg describes the "Afro-Portuguese" ivories thus:

> the African craftsmanship is attested not only by the representation of Africans and African animals, but by African methods of stylising the figure and above all by an African technique of working ivory: the carvings have the appearance of imitations of turned work, yet have in all cases been executed without use of the lathe; and the European ivory-workers's traditional regard for the greatest possible naturalism of modelling and surface texture is eschewed in favour of the African sculptor's instinctive (sic) regard for moderation as expressed in a minimum for the scale of details.[13]

Apparently nothing changed by way of technique or material, contrary to Okeke's suggestion. It is also conceivable that if the trade in tourist art was as pervading as

some are inclined to believe, this possibly exerted a negative influence on Edo art through the pressures of mass production and the relaxation and eventual decline of the institution of art criticism which the guilds and the royal court previously exercised, rather than led to any laudable developments in style or practice.

Okeke describes the Edo artists as pioneer transitional artists, but this could only be correct if one places African and European art at two poles and only sees transition in terms of a gradual cross-over from the former to the latter. The truth, however, is that the art of Benin, for example, has always been "transitional", and that the most significant stylistic incident in the evolution of Edo art was not the advent of the Portuguese and the introduction of European figures and Christian icons, but the introduction of Ife traditions of royal portraiture and brass casting, presumably about 1280 when the master artist Ighuaeghuae was despatched from the court of Ife to the court of Oba Oguola.[14] In Benin, according to tradition, the art from Ife was then domesticated and the style indegenised.[15]

The European advent of the 15th century in Benin, therefore, is not as significant as it may be made to seem. What took place had precedents and would repeat, which was that artists, living and reflecting the dynamics of their society and their times, absorbed their several aspects, and in some cases, yielded to their pressures.

In a sense this is important for the student of 20th century African art, especially those aspects severally referred to as "contemporary", "modern" or "international".[16] The tendency to equate so-called "hybridism", which term we reject as not accurately reflective of the patterns of cultural assimilation or eclecticism, with decadence or inauthenticity, denies that ability of great art to emerge from the

meeting of cultures, which is precisely what history attests to.

It is indeed remarkable that, contrary to the impression created by apologetic lamentations of the "loss" of African art in the 20th century, in Nigeria for instance, neither did Europe introduce its artistic idioms nor did it encourage their assimilation. After the collapse of the Portuguese trade monopoly in the 1530s, European traders and travellers later turned their attention to the trade in slaves, giving up both intimate contact with the peoples of the region and the enthusiasm for evangelisation. When these resumed in the 18th century with the decline in the slave trade precipitated by Abolition campaigns and policies in Europe, the missionaries and slave dealers turned "legal traders" and administrators, were notable in their philistinism. Aided by their local collaborators, they went about their business with a brutal and one-minded dedication to the salvation of the 'primitive' soul, which for the traders was indeed secondary to the commercial motives of post-slave trade interests, and which preoccupation found no room for an artistic dimension. The introduction of missionary education, and its initial forms, were decided by the conveniences of evangelical work and a better trading environment rather than any cultural interaction between Europe and the host peoples. Mission schools were established in the second half of the 19th century merely to furnish the church and the trading companies with cheap, local manpower. The missions needed interpreters and minor teachers, the growing colonial concerns cheaper menial workers and law enforcement cadres. As Galloway has written, "these early mission schools now appear to us as somewhat uninspired in their conception and excessively utilitarian in their concentration upon Reading, Writing and Arithmetic (the Catechism being printed alongside the multiplication tables in their text books)."[17] The Rev. Birch

Freeman's school time-table of 1848 included Geography. There was no art. As Okeke has put it, "it is obvious that ... cultural and creative education was not considered important for the converts".[18]

Not only were the missionaries philistine, as shown in their implacable dedication to the destruction of objects of the material cultures of the people among whom they worked, there was also a strong element of racist condescension. The African was believed incapable of creative endeavours.[19] It was argued that, "rather than impose on them what will end up being a torturing load, they can be taught some aspects of European crafts which will be useful to various missions in the colony".[20]

This missionary policy of hostility towards all creative engagement by the converts, enshrined also in the curricula of mission schools, remained in place not only in Nigeria but in other places till well into the 20th century, and would draw an impassioned criticism from G. A. Stevens at a meeting of the staff of Achimota College, Gold Coast, in March 1928, where the said Mr Stevens argued strongly for the recognition of the humanity and thus equal creative and mental capabilities of the African and the acknowledgement of his rich creative past in the introduction of more meaningful and non-discriminatory art courses in schools.[21] Technically, the disposition of the missionaries and their educational policies compromised any form of open artistic assimilation or intermingling. Any manifestations of creative facility in the European idiom would have been seen as threatening to the racist belief in "natives" as people of lesser endowment. Artistic practice in the idiom of the people was condemned as heathen idolatry and violently combated. Tons of art objects were seized and destroyed in celebrated bonfires and converts were warned in damning

language of the irrevocably harsh consequences of either creating or keeping them. For the first half century of its establishment in the region, Christianity proved even more philistinic than Islam had been in the Sudan region.

If anything laid the grounds for movement in a specific direction in the art of the cultures in these areas, it was the entire matrix of the European presence rather than any specific artistic influences it consciously instituted or encouraged, and through this presence the broad cultural effects of evangelism and political occupation which gradually undermined existing structures and the nature of institutions involved in the production and patronage of art. As in the Congo in the 15th and 16th centuries, and Benin, and even more so, the fierce and irreverent onslaught of a determined Christianity on the values and institutions of the host peoples not only affected their influence and appeal, but the nature and underlying world views of those institutions.

In some cases the aggressiveness of western cultural incursions, and in others the natural pragmatism of the host cultures, worked to engender gradual mutations which in turn were reflected in the art forms. Among the Igbo one tendency was to domesticate the intruding culture, to integrate it into the existing frames as a manifestation of the broadness of reality and existence. Not only were aspects of the Christian faith assimilated into the liturgy of Igbo worship,[22] some of its icons were acquired as well. So were images of the white man who was seen both as enemy and as enigma, and for his intriguing powers, ignoring his irreverence and brutality, was deemed fit to join the gallery of forces unknown. Mbari artists appropriated the increasingly visible character and, as it were, seated him in their own space. Because the white man had entered the realm of perceptible reality and imagination, he was

naturally incorporated into the motival sources of the artist.

It must be noted that the Mbari, the mud sculpture gallery put up by the Igbo as sacrifice to the Earth Goddess, is reserved for the dead and the 'non-living', the mythical yet not necessarily heroic. Herbert Cole mentions that Mbari figures must not resemble living individuals, or any such individual would be visited with instant death.[23] It is indeed possible that the white man, lacking in individual identity and thus being generic, was put in the Mbari not merely in acknowledgement of his presence, but also to contain him, to banish him from the arena of the normal and living by condemning him to the space of the non-living. In any case, it is relevant that the process was not in deference to undue pressure from the outside, but an attempt to preempt such pressure by working out a convenient arrangement within existent paradigms, very much in recognition of what Charles Long[24] has described as the "disjunctive" implications of a cultural invasion, which situation requires re-adjustment, a relaxation of boundaries so as to admit and contain the intruder-culture, possess, and transform it.

The character of the European did not appear in the Mbari alone but also in such other forms as masking. New spirits were founded and indeed continue to be created to assume the figure and idiosyncrasies of the white man. Masking costumery underwent a transformation alongside the gradual transformation of society as a whole, not in deference to the outsider culture but in acknowledgement. Whatever appropriations were made were fitted into the broad frames of existing structures, and the incorporation was natural and not distinguished. Culture has always worked that way, without needing situations of violent imposition or transfiguration.

More disjunctive responses would occur side by side in different areas and

different regions, under different circumstances an example of which is the prescriptive patronage of Yoruba sculptors in the 1950s by the Catholic mission. The sculptors were brought in by the church to recreate Christian icons and produce anecdotal pieces illustrating morals from the Bible in the usual Yoruba idiom and without reference to European visual interpretations. Quite instructively, this did not precipitate a direct fall in standards though it introduced a whole set of new imagery, preoccupations, and relationships. The project which The Rev. Caroll embarked upon in Oye Ekiti was more affined to the Bini model of cultural relationship, whereby the existing tradition goes into the service of the outsider culture instead of appropriating it, but because it lacked the vulgar mercantilism of Portuguese tourist patronage and worked with greater understanding, lest we say sympathy, of the host culture, it was able to produce work which, although it served a new institution and new structures, had the freedom to invent its own creative responses to its demands.

The advent of a new artistic idiom or tendency akin to that of Europe, was only one more response, no more significant than the foregoing, and, as noted earlier on, in the case of Nigeria, it began within the host culture and inspite of, rather than due to, direct European or Christian policies on art. The one man credited with being the earliest recorded Nigerian to draw and paint in the European manner, began this on his own. It is known that Aina Onabolu was not the first West African to practice painting and the graphic arts in the verisimilar manner of Renaissance Europe,[25] but he is certainly the earliest recorded West African on the continent as opposed to outside, to do so by teaching himself. When Onabolu [1882-1963] began to draw as a school boy in Ijebu Ode in the 1890s, copying out illustrations from European religious and business literature,[26] it was hardly a manifestation of a culture in demise

capitulating to the invader. As we noted above, neither was European art pervading or easily accessible, given the rather blunt tastes of the European community at the time, nor was it directly introduced among the population or the converts. Instead, it was they who noticed it, and made a conscious effort to appropriate rather than yield to it. Although Onabolu felt it was the "true art", the relationship between the cultures in this case precluded any obvious impositions. True, a colonialist culture needs not "impose" itself directly, at times working even more effectively through a subtle process of subversion and gradual intrusion, and which fact in this case explains Onabolu's strange perception of the European idiom and his almost fanatical predilection to it throughout his life. But the drawn out opposition of the missionaries to any artistic activity on the part of converts rather worked at a tangent, not only preventing immediate popular deference to it, but also effectively alienating it for a long time. On the other hand, the undermining of those socio-cultural institutions which had already begun the more natural process of assimilating the experiences into their own spaces was equally inimical to a more conspicuous reflection of the European element in the art of the colony.

While cultural transfigurations are usually only an aspect of general socio-political configuration and history of ideas of a society, quite often, art works ahead or behind rather than in tune with the rest of these dynamics. The adoption of graphic verisimilitude in Nigerian art, for instance, is an example of a case where the artist presages a phenomenon independent of the decided wave of socio-dynamic factors. Just as aspects of the European presence were strained and drawn into the art traditions of the colony, the idiom of graphic verisimilitude was adopted, not deferred to, with the pioneers working independent of the European to propagate it,

thus being able to influence its peculiarities and direction. Between 1900 and 1906 when he finished school and took up a job with the colonial marine department in Lagos, Onabolu worked on his own without encouragement or approval. He made use of his advantaged placement to obtain materials from England, and applied his resources not only to art practice but also to the teaching of his chosen idiom. That his dedication was shaped by his considerably deferential disposition is of less importance. He saw the canons of naturalism, like the science of perspective for which he became widely known all over Lagos, and the strict adherence to the details of anatomy, not as inventions of Europe but as belonging to a universal artistic 'language' open to all cultures. He was actively discouraged and subtly threatened by Europeans, and indeed here we find one of the rare examples in the history of cultures where a culture actively stands in the way of its own propagation among a different people. In 1910, for instance, a J. Holloway of the Nigerian Railway, Lagos, wrote to him thus:

> I am happy you yourself realise the danger of going your forefather's way ... by creating the type of art that our church can quarrel with... I came back from Abeokuta a few days ago, and I must here bring to your knowledge what the Rev. in our church said. This Rev. gentleman strongly rebuked the congregation for their stubborn devotion to their idols which he regarded as heathen objects. They were considered ungrateful people who could not appreciate what God had done in their lives ...Though you once said that your own art is special ...I am not trying to discourage your type of art for the colony, but knowing your potential very well, you may have to think well about its acceptance in the colony.[27]

Despite reactions such as this, he continued to work and to push the new tendency. Between 1900 and 1920 he made a consistent and relentless effort to convince the colonial education department to introduce art in the schools, but these met with little or no enthusiasm or favour. A communication between him and the deputy director

of the department in Lagos in 1919 typifies the reluctance of the colonial administration. Onabolu had written to the department to grant him permission to teach art in four schools in the Lagos area on the advice of head masters of mission schools willing to give the new subject a try. In his letter, he pointed out the great advantages of introducing what he described as "the prestigious art of drawing and painting," and made reference to his already proven ability in it and the commendation of highly placed personages in the colony. He also attached his *curriculum vitae* as well as the names of three referees. In his reply of 3 April, 1919, the acting deputy director of education in the colony, Mr L. Richards, regretted that he was not disposed to grant the permission sought, referring Onabolu back to the school heads. He however pointed out with all sympathy that it was doubtful that the mission heads would need his services.[28]

Onabolu was not deterred. He collected willing enthusiasts and gave them private tuition. Eventually some of the school heads, contrary to the deputy director's sarcastic pronouncement, took him on, and we are told that at some point he was teaching four schools in the Lagos area, equally using his growing personal influence to spread the idiom. In his practice his intention was indeed not to appropriate an artistic tendency but to prove that it was not culture specific and could not, by its very nature, be seen as a manifestation of the superiority of one culture or people to another. There are ambiguities about his position between the culture which produced him and the invading culture which confronted him and his generation. Nevertheless, he saw in the practice and propagation of the new artistic tendency not only its redefinition as a supra-language but also an affirmation of the capabilities of his own culture, a restatement of his equality with the European, is not

in doubt. It is interesting that for him proficiency in the art was not a manifestation of capitulation to the invading culture but a tool of nationalistic reaffirmation and annulment of colonialist supremacism. Whether this was a valid or effective form of nationalism is subordinate to the fact it was so intended, the fact that, though its definable standards were set by Europe, it was all the same not intended as self-validation before Europe but as the invalidation of Europe, fitting quite firmly with the participation of Africans in the subsequent great wars which unwittingly served the purpose of revealing or confirming that, as a human, the European is not distinguishable from others. If the African could show that he could do what the European claims to possess solely the ability to do, then he succeeds in returning the latter to his rightful position of ordinary human, and pulling from under his feet the false ideological platform of colonial occupation and domination. In other words, it could indeed be argued that it was valid as a form of nationalism, a tool of direct confrontation with the racist philosophical foundations of colonialism.

In 1920 Onabolu, with the help of friends and patrons, went to England to study art at the St. John's Wood College, after several years of distinguished practice and teaching. According to his son, Dapo Onabolu, his mission was to acquire "whatever he could of the European sciences of painting, perspective, anatomy and the other specialisations and ancillary disciplines which characterise European art education".[29] Having proven himself quite competent in these areas long before 1920, a more logical reason for Onabolu's period in art colleges in Europe would be the determination to plug all holes in his claim to equality with the European, as well as the calculation that a diploma in teaching would place him more favourably to gain finally the official approval he needed to introduce art teaching to schools. Although

these two reasons work together, the earlier is indeed of greater importance because it defines not only the character of the man but also a phase in the making of the 20th century African artist.

It is clear that, at least in the case we have looked at so far, the development of the verisimilar idiom in painting could be defined in phases, the earliest phase being that of cultural nationalism through the mastery of the idiom and the nullification of its Eurocentric pretensions. School education which was instituted to produce cheap hands for church and colonial government, was appropriated in the machinations of the colonised as a ground for unravelling the mystique of the European preparatory to his dislodgement. The novelist Chinua Achebe has shown how, in this phase of the encounter between the "native" and the European coloniser, it was divined that the more pragmatic approach of acquiring the tools of the coloniser and domesticating them was not only a way of undermining the moral and ideological foundations of the incursion by proving equality, but also of confronting him on his own grounds.[30]

These beginnings of verisimilitude in painting and the graphic arts - and it is important to make this definition since there were already traditions of verisimilitude in the sculpture of several African societies, in Ife and among the Igbo for instance, long before the advent of Europeans - were therefore a part of the general readjustments of these societies in their bid to either confront, repulse, or assimilate and domesticate the European phenomenon. And this ran parallel with readjustments and expansions within existing artistic idioms and traditions to reinterpret and accommodate the same phenomenon. The work of Onabolu's generation was therefore a multi-pronged process, manifesting not only in the introduction and

adoption of easel naturalism but also in natural innovations in masquerading, so called 'traditional' sculpture, as well as other areas of art and life, indeed the entire world view of the colonised. And the advent of easel naturalism as a singular strain of response neither defines nor circumscribes 20th century African art.

If the early stage of this development was strict in its appropriation of aspects of the conventional European idiom as a way of subverting the invading culture, while at the same time inevitably disengaging from aspects of the existing artistic traditions, the next phase in the continuing process of cultural nationalism sought a reintegration within those traditions. In the Nigerian case this stage began with both the advent of the next generation of self-trained artists after Onabolu, as well as the appearance on the scene of the British art teacher, Kenneth C. Murray. After his return from Europe in 1922, Onabolu was finally officially assigned as an art teacher to schools in Lagos and the environs. By 1926 the load was understandably too heavy for one teacher, and Onabolu requested of the colonial education department that another art teacher be appointed. In the absence of candidates in the colony, the administration brought Murray in[31]. He was, however, held in higher regard by the colonial administration than Onabolu and, in the words of Oloidi, "given an almost exclusive recognition [and] many powerful responsibilities: art teacher, travelling teacher, Art Supervisor, Education Officer, and, though unofficially, preserver of Nigerian antiquities, all duties performed almost at the same time."[32]

Murray's perception of the relationship of the colonial to his culture at this period was quite different from Onabolu's. For him it was more important that colonial peoples reflected their own cultures and environment in their art, irrespective of the media or idiom. Murray encouraged his students to portray scenes from the

everyday life of their societies as a means of preserving and perpetuating their independent identity. If Onabolu's themes and methods were too steeped in the European tradition, as they were perceived to be, Murray taught his students to eschew such levels of the "alien" element. Only thus could they be correctly engaged in cultural nationalism.

The differences between Onabolu's methods and postulations and Murray's could be explained at several different levels. On one level, as a part of the colonising culture Murray was incapable of comprehending and appreciating accurately, especially at the level of mental and emotional involvement, the true state of the colonial's mind in relation to the European presence in his society and culture. At a purely intellectual level, he could discern and possibly empathise with the intricate contradictions which are the inevitable part of cultures in the process of creating room for another, but lacking the privilege of belonging in these cultures, his perception of their realities was inescapably handicapped. He was unable to see the element of confrontation and cultural nationalism in Onabolu's appropriation and propagation of verisimilitude and other aspects of the conventional European idiom.

The differences between the African artist and the European art teacher were fundamentally those of the insider and the outsider. What the outsider perceived as self-rejection and an unnecessary effort at self-validation in the colonial, was only the latter's way of resolving the emergent contradictions of his experience,[33] an experience which, because he did not possess it, he could not also fully grasp. While the enthusiastic and sympathetic outsider, or what Susan Vogel now refers to as the 'intimate outsider'[34], finds rejectionism a better response to the incursion of European culture if the colonial must preserve his own culture, the latter is always better

disposed to devise his own appropriate responses even if they appear contradictory or capitulatory.[35]

Despite his genuine interest in the cultures he met, and his dedication to their preservation, Murray in a sense failed to understand these cultures and their predilection to not only a gradual transformation, as is the nature of cultures, but also to wholesome appropriation of other cultures. A combination of colonial power, even if not acknowledged or consciously applied, and the requisite alienability of the foreign mind, unwittingly result in both undue over-zealousness - he was reputed to possess the energy and restlessness of five men[36] - and a pontificatory attitude to cultural conservatism. Somehow, in spite of all good intention, it is impossible for the colonising culture, or any part thereof, to devise an appropriate response to itself for the colonised. Only the latter can adequately work out its own approach even to the threats of a violent invading culture.

The Murray element in Nigeria and the school of art it engendered, represent the earliest form of a pattern which would run through 20th African art, and its attempt to define for the colonised what form cultural nationalism should take, marks the direct involvement of Europeans in 20th century African art. As the earliest example of this strain, it is remarkable how much the art produced by Murray's pupils falls in place with those produced by the several 'workshops' and art centres that would later sprout all over the continent under the direction and fostering of other European art teachers. The Murray method was the beginning of the school of 'authenticity' in 20th century African art appreciation, an authenticity defined outside of the culture it supposedly signifies. This not only repeated under McEwen in Rhodesia[37] and Georgina Betts in Nigeria,[38] among many others, it also triggered the

sprouting of distinct sub-strains like what, for want of a better word, are designated 'popular art' and which, because of this strong affinity to that which is considered the 'authentic', that is, faithful to the "native's" culture in the thinking of the outsider, have become for the West the "preferred version" of 20th century African art.

The most prominent tendency in most of these is a lack of strong affective presence, of excellence in skill, technique and use of material. The images are remarkably characterless, lacking in the ingenuity which assimilation and reinterpretation produced in, say, Mbari houses, or the precision of imagery in the strain which Onabolu represented. Without meaning to arrive at a critique without criteria, there is a sense in which the artistic tendencies which have grown out of direct European involvement in the forging of African art, have all produced a level of decadence, if we may take decadence to sum up decline in the acquisition and rigorous application of skill, failings in the exertion of the creative imagination which generally result in decline in the sophistication of design and the visual resolution of concepts, a lack of sustained originality, and repetitiveness[39] due both to this minimality of creative genius and to the pressures of mercantilist patronage. Inevitably the art degenerates into tourist curio, and the process is so quick it is hardly noticeable especially since the line between it and the later is so thin it is almost non-existent. Most examples of what we might call European-induced art in Africa have proved , at a certain level, amenable to this descent: the soap-stone sculptures of Zimbabwe, misleadingly called Shona and developed under the tutelage of a British culture broker, Potopoto art from Central Africa, Oshogbo art from Nigeria. It would be wrong to imply that only this strain of 20th century African art has given in to tourist voracity, but where this has happened from within the existing

idioms, it is due to the collapse of original, sustaining worlds of view and structures of patronage. In the case of European-induced art, it is mainly due to an inherent weakness deriving from a fundamental colonialist impingement on the dynamics of cultural transformation.

In the study of 20th century African art and artists, it is important to note that it is indeed the above tendencies, rather than that exemplified in the work of Onabolu, that is European-induced, and that it is the latter, more than the former, that represents an authentic internal response to the colonialist presence. If the term "authentic", which we shall be denouncing later in this study, should ever be applied to any aspects of or tendencies in 20th century African art, it is indeed that which evolved not through the sympathetic impositions of the European keen on helping the "native" preserve his "own culture and ways", but through the internal devices of the colonised in coming to terms with the encroaching culture. These devices may then be perceivably conservative, in which case art absorbs the new experiences into its existing formal structures, and thus effectively neutralises them by accommodating them, or extremist and rejectionist, in which case they eventually prove unworkable and unrealistic since they defy the mutative essence of culture. They may also be seemingly radical, whereby the forms of the invading culture are carefully appropriated and subverted on a broad level by the colonised using them to disprove the uniqueness or superiority of the coloniser and thus the validity of colonial occupation. Incidentally, appreciation of 20th century African art has consistently failed to discern and place the latter correctly.

If developments in all aspects of African art in this century can be perceived as phases of cultural nationalist response to the colonialist incursion, a fourth phase

could be seen in the 1950s in Nigerian art whereby artists working in the tendency begun by Onabolu begin to redefine the appropriated form and to reassess the response to colonialism. At this stage in history, disproving colonialist superiority was no longer of paramount importance. Other historical events had already offered the colonised opportunities to do this sufficiently and on a more effective and practical political level. The Great European wars provided good ground for soldiers from the colonies to confirm their equal humanity with the European. Also, wave after wave of young African intellectuals had cropped up, having proved themselves adequately in Europe and America, and had opportunity to study the colonialist on his own ground. The period of rigorous self-validation was over, and nationalism, both political and cultural, was now geared towards not only the collapse of the colonial structure but also the reconstruction and reconsolidation of the colonial people's own structures. The essence of reactive tendencies in art was no longer to prove the equality of cultures and peoples but to comprehend the times generally within the context of a free people and independent cultures. Art was no longer formalistically combative against the outsider but revisionist, taking time to review elements which were originally relevant in its confrontation with the other.

The wholesome and uncritical appropriation of the forms of conventional European verisimilitude art was called into question. It is noteworthy that its adoption at the turn of the century deliberately ignored developments in Europe at the time which ironically also questioned its supremacy. The specific idiom of the European Enlightenment, and not the aberrant forms at the beginning of this century, was seen to be more representative of colonialist culture and power structure, and for this reason was the appropriate idiom to be de-ethnicised to effectively undermine

the ethnocentric foundations of colonialism. With the passing of that stage in colonial cultural response, it became possible to dissociate the power structures with a specific idiom and to attempt a general reassessment of the varied manifestations of colonialist culture.[40]

Also, the new developments in Europe had become indismissible just as they were of enormous interest in both their form and intents. The entire landscape of cultural politics now required careful recontemplation.

As more young African artists trained not only in Europe but also at home in art institutions with considerable European presence, and were exposed not only to selected forms but to the entire gamut of artistic traditions from other cultures, two of the strains we saw earlier came together, but under a different circumstance and context with different implications.

The growing generation of academy-trained artists and others who worked close to them, sought to configure their experiences and those of their societies, but at their own prompting rather than under the pressures of colonialist benevolence. Those who trained in Europe, like the Nigerian Ben Enwonwu or the Senegalese Paa Ibra Taal, now took the forms they found for granted as also belonging to them, being aware of the drift in the roots of modern European art, and applied them to their own forms of cultural nationalism through their themes and imagery, and very much on their own terms.

The element of political potency shifted from pure form to content. If Onabolu painted portraits and landscapes in the strict classical manner of the academy to prove there were no differences, the new artists would rather show that there are indeed differences. Taal worked very close to the Negritude movement in Paris and

the themes of motherland and cultural pride were very central in his work. Enwonwu, though on a less intense level which in itself mirrored the differences which the colonial experience had engendered in different parts of the continent, also worked on like themes. In Nigeria, Akinola Lasekan, a self-trained artist, though he worked in the naturalistic style, devoted part of his work to active nationalist agitation, challenging colonialism in his imagery.[41] The equality of races was no longer seen as evidenced in the things they hold in common but in their differences.

For those working and studying on the continent this stage was shaped by the changes in the nature of direct of European interest and involvement as it moved from the active and philistinic antagonisms of the earliest period to dormant complacency at the beginning of the century, and to liberal benevolence from the late twenties till the seventies. Beginning the fifties, however, European involvement especially in the art schools was one of re-emphasising Euro-supremacy by propagating what they perceived as European idioms.

In a cynical letter in *Nigeria* Magazine in 1963, a certain Ogedengbe, who might indeed be the German critic Ulli Beier, writing from Ibadan, noted that, despite declamatory yet hypocritical treatises on the dangers of "unintelligently copying European prototypes," sculpture students at the College of Science and Technology were being taught "a watered down version of Marino Marini"[42] by their teacher, the sculptor Vincent Butler, an observation Butler rebuffed from Edinburgh by scoffing:

> That the sculpture of Marini, or rather the tradition of which he is a product permeated through my teaching to my pupils is obvious, any fool can see that; these are my traditions and it is only natural that I should pass them on in my teaching.[43]

This shift from the tradition which Murray began and which the art workshops and their founders carried on, drew a different reaction at this moment in history from

the more serious of the young artists. They knew that European idioms no longer held the same meaning they did in Onabolu's age; they were no longer to be subverted by merely being acquired. More significantly, the manner and context of their propagation had also shifted; it was no longer appropriation by the colonised as in the earlier period, but imposition by the colonialist through the increased number of Europeans teaching art in the colonies, and the political implications were sufficiently inscribed in this dimension.

The formation in 1958 of the Zaria Art Society by a little group of students at the Nigerian College of Arts, Science and Technology, Zaria, which we will return to later, was precisely for the purpose of rejecting this tendency and restoring the pattern of internally generated responses in place of impositions, whether benevolent or chauvinistic. Its objectives, which fell in place with the tendency in the work of African artists educated in Europe during the period though the specific thematic preoccupations were not necessarily identical or uniformly induced, were to reclaim the definition of artistic form and identity in the face of a cultural incursion, as the prerogative of a people. In line with this, the young artists felt it was their duty to reassess developments in their relationship with the colonialist culture and devise new means of coming to terms with its realities. Within the strain of their own practice, the artists saw need to delve deeper into their own backgrounds, not out of the prompting of Europeans but as part of the internal dialectic. Understanding well the peculiar circumstances necessitating the manner of artistic response in Onabolu's time, and indeed perceiving correctly the nationalistic nature of that response and its historicity, they saw a new phase in the continuing process of dealing with the reality of the European presence.

What we have outlined here is not a definitive history of 20th century African art, but an attempt to show, first, that in all its forms it contains elements of response to alien presences which it either strains and domesticates within its own existing frames, acquires and masters so as to apply to fundamental political principles, or indeed outrightly capitulates to. Second, it is an attempt to recognise that the element of cultural nationalism has been a strong and decisive one in shaping the nature of these forms or what we have so far referred to as strains, and even when these appear to contain contradictions, such contradictions are not inherent but determined by specific epochal factors.

Third, we have implied that the strength of different tendencies in 20th century art have considerably relied upon the nature of these responses, appropriative or submissive. We have indeed briefly held that strands and strains of the European presence appear through active appropriation by the colonised, and not mere imitation. In other words the colonised also possess the capacity to appropriate and domesticate, even if this is partly compromised by their unfavourable position in the colonial power structure.

These are relevant observations if one must understand 20th century African art and artists. In looking at the work of Uzo Egonu we do not intend to offer explanations or justifications for the nature of his art but to the extent that they are relevant to understanding and appreciation. Egonu, though he studied in Europe, very much falls into the strain and phase typified by the Zaria art society, which understands the nature of 20th century art and rather than defer to imposed forms, approaches them so as to appropriate them as part of the process of acknowledging the reality of their presence, and reacting to this reality. Not only shall we look at

some of the problems issuing fundamentally from misunderstanding this element or dimension, we shall also see how the process defines the individual or epochal aesthetic, and how indeed 20th century African art can be seen to owe its nature, dimensions, and multiple manifestations to this process.

Notes

1. John Mercer, *Spanish Sahara* [London: Allen and Unwin, 1976] p. 75.

2. Ola Oloidi, "Growth and Development of Formal Art Education in Nigeria, 1960", *Transafrican Journal of History*, Vol. 15, 1986, p. 109.

3. Uche Okeke, 'History of Modern Nigerian Art', Nigeria Magazine, Nos. 128-129, 1979, p. 100.

4. Ruth Slade, *King Leopold's Congo* [London: Oxford University Press, 1962] p.3.

5. Ibid., p. 2.

6. Ibid., p. 2.

7. E. G. Ravenstein, *The Strange Adventures of Andrew Batell of Leigh, in Angola and Adjoining Regions* [London: Hakluyt Society, 1901] p. 120.

8. Nnochi Ikongwu, 'History of Education in Nigeria, 1842-1942" Ph.D Dissertation, New York University, 1946, pp. 1-2.

9. Collin Legum, 'Great Benin', *Nigeria* Magazine, Special issue, October 1960, p. 106.

10. Okeke, op. cit. p. 100.

11. William P. Fagg, *Afro-Portuguese Ivories* [London: Batchworth Press, und.] p. xviii.

12. Okeke, op. cit., p. 100.

13. Fagg, op. cit., p. xix.

14. John Picton has called my attention to the fact there is no historical veracity to the suggestion of Ife as a source of the Bini renaissance, though the mythology holds strong.

15. Elsy Leuzinger, *Africa: The Art of The Negro Peoples* [London: Methuen, 1960] p. 120.

16. Susan Vogel, Africa Explores [New York: The Center for African Art, 1991]

17. A. D. Galloway, 'Missionary Impact on Nigeria', *Nigeria Magazine*, Special issue, October 1960, p. 63.

18. Uche Okeke, 'History', p.103.

19. Ibid., p. 103.

20. Akinola Lasekan, 'Western Art on African Shores', unpublished manuscript, University of Nigeria, Nsukka, 1966.

21. G. A. Stevens, 'The Future of African Art: With Special Reference to Problems Arising in Gold Coast Colony', *Africa: Journal of the International Institute of African Languages and Cultures*, Vol. III, 1930, pp. 150-160.

22. D. I. Nwoga, *Nka na Nzere: Igbo Cosmology, The 1984 Ahiajoku Lecture* [Owerri: Government Printer, 1984]

23. Herbert Cole, Mbari: Art and Life among the Owerri Igbo [Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1982]

24. Charles Long in interview with Carolyn M. Jones and Julia M. Hardy, Jones and Hardy, 'From Colonialism to Community: Religion and Culture in H . Long's *Significations', Callaloo,* Vol. 11, No. 2, Spring 1988, p. 269.

25. In his *Gallery of Gold Coast Celebrities*, Dr. I. S. Ephson writes about Attabora Kweku Enu [1742-1798], an ex-slave who became a painter in Britain and worked "in 1788 ... in the service of Cosway, the first painter to the Prince of Wales" [p. 31]. Unfortunately, I have been unable to trace Enu's slave narrative, *Reflections on the Slave Trade and the Slavery of Negroes*, reportedly published in English and French, to which Ephson refers.

26. Ola Oloidi, 'Constraints on the Growth and Development of Modern Nigerian Art in the Colonial Period', Arts Faculty Seminar Series, University of Nigeria, Nsukka, 1986. Unpublished. p. 24.

27. J. Holloway, "Dear Aina", Letter dated October 4, 1910, archives of the Onabolu family.

28. L. Richards, April 3, 1919, Letter in the collection of Akinola Lasekan Estate.

29. Dapo Onabolu, 'Aina Onabolu', *Nigeria Magazine*, No.79, December 1963, p. 295.

30. In *Arrow of God* the chief protagonist, Ezeulu, explains sending his son to join the whiteman thus: "When we want to make a charm we look for the animal whose blood can match its power...And our fathers have told us that it may happen to an unfortunate generation that they are pushed beyond the end of things, and their back is broken and hung over a fire. When this happens they may sacrifice their own blood." *The African Trilogy* [London: Pan Books, 1988.] p. 456. It is the same conviction that made Elesin Oba, charioteer for his clan, send his son Olunde to study overseas, in Soyinka's *Death and the King's Horseman.*

31. See letter to the Education Department, Lagos, by K. C. Murray, 4 November 1937, soliciting that "Mr Onabolu on whose request I have been brought be given every possible cooperation which will encourage him to train more boys in Lagos." Papers of K. C. Murray, Archives of the National Museum, Lagos.

32. Oloidi, 'Growth and Development', p. 29

33. See Oloidi, "Growth and Development", pp. 114-115.

34. Susan Vogel, *Africa Explores* [New York: Center for African Art, 1991]

35. It is indeed this rejectionist intractability which finally destroys Okonkwo, symbol of anti-colonial resistance, in Achebe's *Things Fall Apart,* alienating him from his more pragmatic community and eventually driving him to frustration and suicide.

36. Oloidi, *Growth and Development*, p. 114.

37. The Rhodesia workshop which produced what is now known as Shona Sculpture, announced in his article, 'Return to Origins', in *African Arts*, Vol. 1, No. 2, Winter 1968, in which he declaimed: "Once again in the history of art, an umbrella of protection has allowed dormant genius to revive."

38. The Oshogbo experiment. For the updated hagiograph on this see Ulli Beier, *Thirty Years of Oshogbo Art* [Bayreuth: Iwalewa, 1991].

39. John Picton has drawn my attention to the presence of this element in Edo art in the late 16th - 17th centuries, after the advent of the Portuguese.

40. See H. Ato Delaquis, 'Dilemma of The Contemporary African Artist', *Transition 50/ Chindaba 1*, October 1975-March 1976, pp. 16-30. Delaquis's account of this period, however, is characteristically vast in generalisations and weak in theoretical analysis. For many the situation was less one of dilemma. See Uche Okeke, 'The Age of Re-assessment of Our Cultural Heritage', President's address delivered to the Zaria Art Society, October 1960, in which he asserts: "This is our age of enquiries and reassessment of our cultural values. This is our renaissance era. In our quest for truth, we must be firm, confident, and joyful...We must not

allow others to think for us in our artistic life...". Address unpublished. Archives, Asele Institute, Nimo, Nigeria.

41. Lasekan worked closely with Nnamdi Azikiwe in the Independence movement, and introduced political cartoons to anti-colonial journalism in West Africa. Okeke has described his cartoons in the West African Pilot as "important if not more effective than the speeches and writings of ... Herbert Macaulay and Nnamdi Azikiwe." Uche Okeke, 'Panorama of Nigerian Art', *Nigeria Magazine*, Nos. 115-116, 1975, p. 37.

42. Ogedengbe, 'Cement Funeral Sculptures', Readers Letters, *Nigeria Magazine,* No. 78, May 1963, p. 153.

43. Vincent F. Butler, Readers' Letters, *Nigeria Magazine*, No. 80, March 1964, p.3.

Chapter Two

THE QUESTION OF THEORY

Despite a history as long as European Modernism, the new art of the past century in Africa has been the subject of rather little critical attention. This is both as a result, as it is in reverse one of the causes, of the absence of concrete and workable theoretical frameworks. The role of expatriates in shaping the new art in Africa shows what enormous control they have had over not only its form and direction but also its appropriation, evaluation, categorisation, definition, stratification and priorization. Also, because of the relationship between the West and the rest of world cultures, not only have these expatriate participants shaped the attitudes of their own society to emergent art forms from these cultures, they have also, to a considerable extent, structured the attitudes and responses of some Africans, especially intellectual Africans, towards themselves and their own contemporary culture.

It should be noted that what discourse has so far existed in this area has been dominated by the self-appointed guardians, most of whom have no strong or sophisticated theoretical inclinations. One of the most intellectual of the group would be Ulli Beier,[1] a fair critic with a background in literature whose responses, in a large part, have remained modest and plain, his subjects handled with both the curiosity of the outsider and considerable scholarly attentiveness. His methods are

very much in the tradition of Herbert Read, imbued with the apologetics of a witness, sympathiser, and campaigner. Beier writes like a historian, but the apologist tone of his discourse keeps it on a plain level, made worse by its narrow determinism.[2] Like Read's apologia for the modernists, the language of Beier's discourse is more polemic than critical, and often the object of his discourse is everything but the art. Because he lacks a clear theoretical frame for the contemplation of his subject, Beier falls irretrievably into the biographical. Unfortunately, the history and appreciation of 20th century African art has not been able to transcend this level of discourse.[3]

Beier's lack of critical tools is manifest in his *Three Yoruba Artists*[4] in which he continues his documentation of Oshogbo art and which, again, takes the safe route of biography. In the end the most conspicuous element in this kind of art history is the marked absence of art itself. Upon close inspection, one finds that underlying this is a certain theoretical dichotomy which considers the new art in Africa essentially different from its parallels in the West and therefore undeserving of the same level of critical contemplation. An element of colonialist fascination for the native which categorises every cultural product from the colony under curio and exotica effectively precludes the application of like levels of critical depth in its discourse. Because the invention of exotica requires a clear definition of its strangeness and thus its Otherness, wherever this Otherness is not clearly inscribed in the product itself its producer becomes the essential defining element. The native being the principal object of curiosity, is elevated above his art, and thus becomes the subject of art historical enquiry. Thus has art historical attention to the new art in Africa remained more a study of individuals with requisite emphasis on their Otherness, from Beier's

pioneer work to the present.[5]

It is this dedication to the invention of Otherness, also, that informs the argument for authenticity in African art which continues to surface even in recent discourse, and continues to provide the theoretical basis for the appreciation and criticism of contemporary african art and culture in the West.[6] The expatriate interest in the perpetuation of which is conceived as authentic African art forms may have begun out of genuine concern. The Murray approach to new Art in Nigeria, discussed in the last chapter, is a case of genuine concern inescapably undermined by the burden of colonial power relations and history, and the fact that the outsider cannot possibly possess a better understanding of acceptable patterns of cultural perpetuation than the owners of the culture. In the case of Frank McEwen's workshops in Rhodesia, however, as obvious from his report of the Shona experiment in 1968, this concern is no longer arguably innocent but is possessed of a grandiosity of pity, knowledge, and salvaging vision.[7] Here the salvage paradigm of colonial ethnography enters art and art history. McEwen perceives a culture in danger, on the verge of collapse, giving way to the outside and dragging down with it a generation of unrequited talent. It is this talent that must be saved, and to do this requires the intervention of those who possess a finer understanding of what needs be done, what McEwen ingeniously describes as "an umbrella of protection."[8]

Although McEwen takes time to point out, as does Beier, that his artists are not tied to any 'traditions', his narration nonetheless constructs a frame of authenticity round their art, as also does Beier, by emphasising the 'originality' of vision of the workshop participants.[9] It is this originality, therefore, unburdened either by a past impervious to these artists's eroded memories as in the Shona, or

existentialist ennui as in Oshogbo, or by the plague of the outside luckily restricted to the academies, that defines their *authenticity* as African artists. James Clifford has identified the colonialist dichotomy of "people *with* or *without history*" as one of the paradigms underlying the concept of authenticity and "'orienting' geopolitical visions in the Occident."[10] What one notices in the introduction of the theory of authenticity into the narration of new art in Africa, is a re-invention and revision of the fiction of [un]historicity. Here the original denial of history to the native is replaced by the erection of a suspended history, inscribed in the individuals involved in the workshops thus narrated. Suspended between tradition and an encroaching intervention, the native is situated at a moment of stayed history. Although history is restored to him, it is only at the moment when this history is in hold that his originality is shown to issue forth. The authenticity of his art is no longer hinged on "inherited structures that either resist or yield to the new", as Clifford observes[11], but to a fiction of absence. In other words Absence returns as the condition for authenticity and thus of Otherness.

The definition of authenticity in new African art as not necessarily a continuation with tradition but *originality* manifest under an "umbrella of protection" has so far not been properly elicited in criticism, and thus has not received appropriate textual evaluation. Beier is perhaps right in dismissing much of the criticism of Oshogbo[12], but not for the reasons he proffers. The validity of Babatunde Lawal's misgivings with the Oshogbo experiment[13] is not entirely in question, nor is that of Naifeh's which Beier dismisses as a "bizzare 'controversy' in the pages of 'African Arts'."[14] What the critiques fail to pick up is this unique revision of the salvage paradigm, inscribed in Beier's and more so in McEwen's narratives, which

introduced the authenticity argument into the history of 20th century African art.

This argument remains as a subtle sub-text in subsequent narratives, only momentarily surfacing in its crude form in such statements as Documenta IX artistic director Jan Hout's in Dusseldorf in 1991[15]. It is also present in much details of transition and continuity in the new art.[16] As the question of theory as theory enters discourse around 20th century African art, there is a growing necessity to erect organised and recognisable structures for interpretation, even if it is only to re-configure existing but hitherto sub-textual frameworks. For instance Keith Nicklin of the Horniman Museum writes about "contemporary Yoruba art" showing "that a successful transition has been made from the 'traditional', pre-colonial period to the completely modern."[17] This way another theory in the guise of apologia is signalled, one of "successful transition". Within the frames of this interpretative structure transition not only underlines the 'authenticity' of the work but equally defines aesthetic value, and the level of success in this transition qualifies the success or otherwise of the work. This way the element of successful transition places it on the rungs of the genuinely African. Where this is lacking, the work is displaced, and thus prohibited from the space of African art.

This evaluative aspect of interpretative paradigms is often ignored, beyond whatever profusion of scholarly critiques cover the pages of journals. In practice successful transition, for instance, is brought in to actively dis/qualify an artist and his work for spaces open to new African art. Curators and art critics still fall back on it in their evaluations, and this could easily be seen in the nature and pattern of recent exhibitions featuring African artists, from the *Magiciens de la terre* at the Pompidou in 1989 to the 1990 Center for African Art exhibition of 20th century

African art in New York.

The question which lingers unanswered, and will remain so because the generating theoretical framework is not only unable to answer it but also depends on its indeterminacy, is what constitutes the body of criteria for the assessment and evaluation of this transition. In the case of "Contemporary Yoruba Art" Nicklin vaguely proposes the presence of "the mythical and religious", what he, in elaboration, enumerates as "a cultural assembly richly peopled with spirits, mythical beasts, kings and profane images of everyday life." One quickly recognises this language and can recall it in McEwen, Beier, and Mount. It is the same language used in qualification of "authentic" literature from Latin America, or the identification of the "originally" Indian or Oriental in Salman Rushdie or Anish Kapoor.[18] A fiction of mythopoetic presence is erected, exclusivised and consigned to the space of the Other: those are projected as not only its strengths, but also the embodiment and ultimate encapsulation of its identity and essence.

It should be logical to conclude that what qualifies the level of successful transition in the work of the "contemporary" Yoruba artist, then, is the quantity of spirits, gnomes, beasts and kings, the mythical and the dark, the element of innocence and sweetness, which it contains. Nicklin finds the element of myth in his body of contemporary Yoruba art "interesting", but even more interesting is the ability of theory to invest mediocrity with the quality of aesthetic success, to transform the mundane by its own power of mythification.

Equally interesting is the fact that the move to introduce proper constructs of theory into the history of new Art in Africa is coming most strongly from America. One explanation for this is the rise of African studies in the United States and the

consequent demand for literature which transcends, or appears to transcend, the blandness and vacuity of existing discourse. But that is one matter. Another is the bid to overtake Europe in the appropriation of new cultural produce from Africa both as an economic strategy as well as continuation of the reclamation of political space and the implantation of hegemony which marked the Africa policy of the United States during the cold war. Quite paradoxically, there is also, the element of self-conscious absolution from the transgressions of colonialism. If Europe has yet again exhibited its colonialist discrepancies in misreading the new art from Africa, shall America not introduce a structure for better reading and understanding, a framework which recognises the authenticity of new African art in the evidence of continuity with its past and the successful transition from tradition to "the completely modern"?

More important than these, though, is the fact that America's unavoidable pluralism has sired what Burgin describes as "the proliferation of such 'micro-political' movements: women, blacks, gays;...and so on,".[19] What one discovers is that these are only little spaces of ethnicity, little circles in which peoples are confined and labelled, and thus excluded from the centre. The eloquent theorisations which legitimise these ethnicities serve only to underline their marginalisation. The relevance of this observation is that it points to the ultimate implications of 'the American way with theory', the American tendency to employ the mythifying powers of theory in furthering the categorisation and marginalisation of polities and phenomena.

This brings us to the antagonism between African commentators and the expatriate, colonialist critical establishment.[20] Besides the grounding of expatriate

theories in grand narratives of the "African" spirit, African commentators have voiced particular concern about the use of theory to inferiorize works of African art visual or literary. These commentators, some of whom happen also to be the formally-trained artists whose works are more often than not perceived to fail the all-determining test of successful transition, have contested the qualifications of the colonialist critic to construct the aesthetic and interpretative theory of new art in Africa. This in a sense affects the level and nature of the African contribution to the discourse. To be involved, it seems, is to be compromised because, on the African side, the cultural critic finds himself often on the defensive since it is his work that is under critical gaze. Lawal's critique of the Oshogbo experiment has been misconceived as an act of jealousy from academy-trained artists. Achebe's critique of colonialist criticism is unable to avoid mention of critiques of his own work, and the tougher the tone of the African artist-critic, the more likely he is to be dismissed as bitter, thus undermining their contributions to critical discourse.[21]

The African artist is drawn into the critical space because of the disparity in strength of African and outside critical establishments which makes it necessary for the artist to step in. To do so then looks like coming to one's own defence. In defining the boundaries of "African art" expatriate criticism creates a situation of contest for grounds, not so much between the artists as between criticism and artistic practice. This way the attention of the indigenous critical establishment is spent on this contest rather than on defining valid areas of critical discourse in reaction to the cultural product.[22] The duty of the moment shifts from the study of cultural phenomena to that of defining areas of legitimacy in the field of criticism.

The outsider sets the pace, the insider contests it.[23] The result is not so much

a resolution and a striving towards the workable and valid as it is repetitive and cyclic, since the situation is not one of genuine and constructive dialogue based on modest scholarship and a shared sensitivity to the burden of history on intercultural commentary and discourse. If the visitor weeps louder than the bereaved, as Achebe has noted of the colonialist critic,[24] the challenge for the African critic becomes one of first reclaiming the discourse before defining the subject. In a sense, African contribution to the discussion of new Art in Africa has in the main remained at this level, held back in a loop of confrontation with a closed-in dominator.

It would be wrong to suppose that the deterministic theories of new art in Africa, though defined by the outside, have no proponents among African scholars and commentators.[25] Evident in the approach of African theorists, though, is a sense of genuine effort to come to terms with the emergence of new cultural products.[26] One of the earliest and most significant of these is the theory of natural synthesis propounded by Uche Okeke and the Zaria art society in 1958.[27] The theory of natural synthesis, in many particulars, does not differ so much from either the authenticity or transition theories. Like the colonialist theories, it is built on the concept of a synthesis of the past and the present as the requisite which 'authentifies' a product of contemporary culture. The signifiers therefore recur: authenticity, tradition, contemporaneity, synthesis, continuity. The centre of discourse is moved to an additional construct: identity, the capability of the cultural product to project a definable provenance and through this the cultural identity of its maker. The Zaria Society theory of natural synthesis erected a new, validating paradigm built on this arguably vague element, and this in itself showed up the complexity of the problem of theory. It was not made quite clear in the group's manifestos and president's

addresses[28] precisely how the admonition that artists go back to their own cultures and seek a stylistic conciliation between them and contemporary experience handles such problems as the break down of cultural borders, or indeed the historical seamlessness of cultures. In a sense the group succeeded in imposing on its members a new and restrictive system whose difference was that it precluded the interventionist voice of the "intimate outsider".

Perhaps this is understandable of a culture contested, but in pulling up the walls around a vulnerable culture, the walls of exclusivity already pulled up around it by the Other are only reinforced. There is something of an acceptance of categories, of identifying with the questions as defined by the outside, of a marginal focus working within the confines determined by the tone of colonialist discourse. The emphasis on identity, or the "search for identity", is of course historically located within the agitation of the colonised for autonomy, and remains the most concrete, initial, departure from the false rhetoric of internally defined authenticity which characterised Negritude discourse, for instance. Yet it works within the frames of the concept of "identity crisis", another deterministic construct which merely extends the "poor native" and "cultures in danger/ disintegrating societies" paradigm of Beier, the workshop masters, and salvage anthropology.

But the theory did also differ from the outsider paradigms in a few other particulars. First, as already noted, it was an internal confrontation with an internal question, a dialogue with the self, and thus more genuine and critical. The paradox of course was that the question of plurality of backgrounds was not addressed, there was also no effort to construct some continental grand narrative, or to define aesthetic elements on a mythical level. The paradigm recognised the gradual nature

of cultural mutation, that of natural evolution rather than forced or coerced synthesis. If change is the condition of art being art, then that change must come of itself and not from without, from the coercions of criticism or the destructive narrow-mindedness of patronage. Its nature must not be predetermined, nor its particularities defined *a priori*, but must evolve in line with the dictates of history and cultural dynamism.

The Zaria theory of natural synthesis was an early example of organised philosophical proposition on the nature and future of new art in Africa from within the body of cultural practice itself. However, it remains a prescriptive aesthetic offering an alternative to the fiction of ahistoricity which previous, expatriate systems had insinuated. As a tool for interpretation it never received equal theoretical input and application from its proponents.

AGAINST CATEGORIES AND GRAND NARRATIVES

The one common failure of all existing theories of new Art in Africa and indeed the culture of African societies, is the burden of categories. The apparent confusion in the language of appreciation over the proper delineation of 20th century African culture is a direct consequence of the passion for categories which has carried over from the strictured traditions of Western discourse. When these strictures are transposed from the discourse of one civilisation into that of others, the result is a belaboured effort to force those cultures into ill-fitting partitions. This is essentially what the construction of categories has done to the discussion of 20th century African cultures.

Because they are generated along a linear configuration, most categories

applied to African cultures are chronological. The problem of clear delineation inevitably arises when the forms and categories overlap in time. Thus no one is able to properly delineate the "contemporary" from the "modern", or even the "traditional" from the "contemporary". Another category thus crops up: the "pre-colonial." This signifies a temporal delimitation, erecting by inference the colonial and the post- colonial. The problem then is, what is colonial African culture? What is post-colonial? And who defines the post-colonial? Whose post-colonial? Is the colonial synonymous with the continuous, the authentic, the alienated? If the colonial signifies also the alienated or inauthentic, where does one allocate the "validated authentic" art produced under political colonialism? To show the futility of this exercise, what is described as "pre-colonial" happens to have been produced under colonialism and "post- colonialism", if we should understand the later to be a temporal category rather the ambiguous and contentious political concept which it denotes. What then defines the pre-colonialism of a mask produced in 1990 unless it could also, for example, qualify another work produced in the same time period as "medieval". There is also the problematic of the "contemporary". Apparently, this is not so much a precise semantic denotation as it is a convenient escape from the difficulties of categorisation, a signifier of its confusion and failure.

Two things are worth taking note of with regard to the application of the category of "contemporary" to African cultures. The first is this semantic ambiguity which extends the circumference of its application without stipulating its particulars and qualifiers. Thus features from a Yoruba Gelede mask are exhibited at the *Magiciens de la terre* show at the Pompidou alongside the cement sculptures of Cyprian Tokoudagba and the work of Joseph Beuys as "contemporary art". The same

Gelede mask from which features were taken would be classified by others as traditional or, by Nicklin's categorisation, pre-colonial. In other words a single object of art becomes traditional, pre-colonial, and contemporary all at once. If the traditional could also be contemporary, the boundaries are therefore certainly unclear and the categories suspicious. The contemporary could as well be traditional. And if the traditional is the authentic, then the contemporary which is also traditional is equally authentic. All this shows the ridicule which colonialist categories bear. It is difficult not to question just what relevance all this is to cultural practice or the understanding and appreciation of the art object, and the answer lies in the second point, which is that these categorisations are more political than aesthetic. It is this that underlies and underlines their futility.

It is worthy of note that the concept of the "contemporary" has a completely different connotation, defines a completely different body of cultural practice, and bears a totally different temporal significance, in the discourse of western culture even if criticism fails to successfully articulate this textually. Which explains the description of the work of Joseph Beuys as contemporary. Gradually, the term is beginning to fill the vacuum which has been created by the demise of western "modernism" and the confusion and non-committedness of "post-modernism", itself a most ambiguous construct[29] which, while recanting the failures and shortcomings of modernism, only seeks to create the ideological framework for the resurgence of colonist appropriation and the recolonisation of non-occidental cultures, by erecting the neo-Grand Narrative of a false universal pluralism.[30] "Contemporary" stands where post-modernism, for sake of its dangerous lack of clarity and obvious distastefulness, should be. In divesting cultural practice of all explicit ideological

tagging, especially in the wake of the fall of the marked grand narratives and the so-called demise of socialism, *contemporary* in the context of western culture assumes its true temporal, semantic signification. But when applied to other cultures it is stripped of this temporal innocence and imbued with the power of demobilisation. It is transformed into a tool of political contest for space and power, the power of being and validity, the contest for a "centre" exclusive to any others even as it is argued that the parallel construct of postmodernism signifies and acknowledges the demise of centre/periphery polity.[31]

What is interesting is that while grand narratives are declining into distaste in Western discourse, if only to be replaced by negating grand narratives as already noted above, Western appreciation of African culture continues to construct and reinforce grand narratives: the grand narratives of Africanity and authentic Africanness, recycling the ancient grand narratives of the homogeneous, monolithic, innocent Other, and in more recent discourse, even of postmodernist transculturalism.[32]

The imposition of master narratives, of privileged readings and prescripts manifests, in several respects, Lyotard's *differand*, the "stronger-party" regulation and resolution of conflict without question or redress. The outsider decides the nature of discourse, constructs the paradigms, revises them as necessary, but all on his own terms. The Other is an absence in the discourse of his own culture and product. The fact that some African cultural theorists are recruited in this exercise only projects their compromised position in the relation by the fact that their induction is an act of co-option, of privileged invitation into the fictionalising projects of the possessors of discourse. There is not so much consultation as there is conditional assimilation

into this process which is outwardly signified in the ownership of the organs and enabling technologies of discourse.[33]

If Western discourse has reached "the *end* of art theory," that is, the moment of fragmentation both of art and of its discourse, as Burgin insists,[34] supposedly signified in the negating [non]system of postmodernist pluralism, the questioning of questions, why then does the West continue to hoist fresh theories on the discourse of African cultures? Or, if discourse at the 'centre' has come to the dead end of theory as "incantation/imposition",[35] why does anyone bother with theory? And the answer here is arguably not farfetched, regarding what argument we have made so. The declaimed dissolution of str[u/i]ctures of etic discourse in the West is not meant to be applied to other cultures since, not possessing same universalising fictions, they could not have undergone same fragmentation of vision. But this is only at the theoretical level. The political economy of the fiction of postmodernism takes us back to the argument above which is that it is in place only as a tactical revision to create room for the confrontation/ recolonisation of former 'Other' cultures in an epoch of imperial disintegration.

Seen in this light, therefore, it is understandable that in practice this fiction is not extended to the 'Other', which is why the process of inventing theories needs not discontinue if this 'Other' must be effectively encapsulated and re-assimilated.

Outside of the political economy of interventionist cultural structures, the African critic or art historian still faces the question of the relevance of theory to cultural discourse. Are theories desirable and necessary for a proper articulation of African cultures? On another level, are categorisations and grand narratives totally irrelevant in the appreciation of 20th century African art? If categories are

unsuccessful, as we have insinuated here, is their failure and futility intrinsic of categorical schema generally or merely inherent in the nature of specific categorisations or the ideological substructures of the categrand? In the absence of delineating categories and unifying narratives, how else does one articulate the form and dynamics of African cultures in the 20th century? Is there no validity at all in categories? Is culture susceptible to prescripts? Are existing categories applicable to our case for study, and if they are, do they constitute ultimate critical paradigms?

If one should lay down a proposition here, a close reading of African cultures shows that they defy categorisation especially on the scale of the homogenising superscripts. Not only do the grand narratives of colonialist appreciation fail to address questions without at the same time diverting the course of discourse or politically disadvantaging forms of African culture, all grand narratives, including the internally generated,[36] fail ultimately. Negritude was one such home-spun grand narrative of African culture posited as an aesthetic theory as well as a critical paradigm. And Negritude failed for several reasons, the most important perhaps being that because its indigenity was itself a fiction, it worked against the inherent vein of African cultures which it claimed to define and which defies such reductionisms as it proposed. Negritude was one of the earliest examples of the reactive nature of the African contribution to the discourse of African cultures, and this was in itself a basic problem in that there was a desperate intent to counter ready-made narratives with a negating narrative. The resulting narrative was thus structured on the format of the offending superscripts rather than in line with the correct nature of the cultures it sought to explicate. It borrowed from all the "radical" ideologies of modernist western discourse, and in the end what was produced was

far from identifiable with objective reality, which is that the dialectics of culture defy the fossilisation of the photographic moment, and secondly, that cultures and cultural products cannot be accurately and comprehensively perceived from a singular, unidirectional perspective. The third reality which Negritude, like all other grand narratives of African culture ignored, is that culture is society-specific and cannot be reduced by the homogenising mythicisations of pan-continentalism. In confrontation with cultural reality, all political mega- aesthetics fail.

Others have observed this of subsequent, "Afro-centrist" attempts at pan-continental narratives. In his *Theory of African Literature*, Amuta notes this in his critique of theories of African literature.[37] He then proceeds to replace the fiction of pan-continental homogeneity with the prescripts of Marxian aesthetics. Luckily nobody has suggested this on a serious note for discussion in the visual arts, though Amuta proposes it not only as a theory of literature but as a theory of African culture. That the Marxian dialectic has failed to accurately comprehend the culture on which its precepts are based makes it an unlikely success with any others. Granted that it cannot be dismissed completely as a tool for the apprehension of reality, its determinism and necessary culture-specificity preclude its feasibility with other cultures, especially cultures that perceive reality from perspectives other than the linear and chronological, and outside of the frames of the material substructures which yield to Marxian analysis. To insist on the invariable of ruling class hegemony as the principal aesthetic determinant in all cultures presents difficulties which complicate the business of interpretation.[38] To read Egonu within this framework, for instance, would require first to establish the "ruling class" and its aesthetic as it relates to the artist. Here the initial problem would be to define the nationality of

this ruling class - Nigerian? British? And what is the prevailing ruling class aesthetic in what political space? Indeed no less unfeasible is it when applied to Igbo culture. How does the Ikenga figure reflect the aesthetic prescripts of the ruling class, and what, in the Igbo case, is the ruling class? In a civilisation with a sophisticated republicanism which fails to fit into either the pre-feudalist or feudalist epoch and in the main defies categorisation within the framework of historical materialism, what is the ruling class and what is "true art"?

In characteristic Marxian reductivism Amuta summarises the underlying aesthetic of 20th century African cultures this way:

> In neocolonial Africa, for instance, what furnishes the decisive context of all cultural practice is capitalist imperialism.[39]

Such simplistic myths question the requisite empiricism of the informing aesthetic and prove unworkable even before they are put to test. How viable a tool is this, for instance, for interpreting the works of Momodu Ceesay or the sculptures of Francis Nnagenda? Or Egonu's landscapes, *The Four Seasons* inspired by his partial blindness in the late 1970s? What are the immediate theoretical and aesthetic relationships between capitalist imperialism and the bead paintings of Jimoh Buraimoh?[40] If we find something of this "decisive context" in the works of Cheri Samba, which indeed fit within the more closely definable anti-neocolonial model, or Muafengejo's prints, do these share the context with Enwonwu's spirit dancers or Salahi's Sahelian poetics? Even in literature, how does the work of Amos Tutuola fare under this "capitalist imperialist" model?

In the 1970s a school of cultural criticism arose under Nigerian literary theorist Sunday Anozie who, after training at the Sorbonne under Rowland Barthés, and studying Saussure whom he describes as his father, decided he had broken the lock

of theoretical 'dilemma' in African cultural discourse by discovering structuralism. This he proceeded to inflict upon the poetry of Christopher Okigbo with particularly contentious results. In his desperation to fit Okigbo's poems into the constructs of structuralist analysis, Anozie turns up with mythical explanations for lines the particularly eclectic poet had in his noted manner lifted straight from other sources. But this was not the only failure of Anozie's introduction of structuralist critical theory to the analysis of 20th century African culture. His most important work on the subject remains the 1981 near-polemic, *Structural Models and African Poetics: Towards a Paradigmatic Theory of Literature*[41] in which he tries with great pain and marked lack of clarity to explicate the susceptibility of African literature to structuralist reading.

Anthony Appia has dealt with the failures of Anozie's experiment in his excellent review essay, 'Strictures on structures: the prospects for a structuralist poetics of African fiction'.[42] First, Appia notes Anozie's inability to establish what exactly structuralism is, outside of lengthy quotes from Saussure, Barthés and everybody else. Anozie's second failure, which Appia also notes, is in his inability to concretely establish the affinities he claims between African systems and the paradigmatic models of structuralist thought. When he attempts to do so, he chooses most disputable, secondary data, especially from Mbiti's[43] mega-narratives of African religious and philosophical systems, corroborating these by references to the equally superscriptive postulations of Janheinz and Tempels. Through all of these, one sees a most disturbing trait in Anozie's practice of theory; a particular disregard for the empirical verification of data. As Appia correctly states, it would be wrong to dismiss off hand the possibilities of structuralist analysis in the reading of African

cultural practice and systems, but Anozie's attempts prove enormously discouraging. His particular obsession with diagramatics and algebra, what Appia aptly describes as "formal mumbo jumbo", is not only irritating but in fact masks his own confusion. In the end Anozie was unable to show the feasibility of his structuralist paradigm in African critical discourse beyond the indication that structuralist analysis has chances with any semiotic system, which observation could be taken for granted.

Anozie's singular important contribution to the question of theory in contemporary African cultural discourse is his recognition of the reductionism of Senghor's postulates on the nature and structure of African cultures. Paradoxically, he fails in his own postulations for the very same reasons. Just as Senghor saw everything from surrealism to existentialism in African thought systems, Anozie seems to see an affinity with everything which takes his fancy. One sees in his theoretical exertions a desperation to drift with the intellectual fringes of western thought, as if to say; to prove ourselves, we must match them case study for case study, pyrotechnic for pyrotechnic. And so, in his essay on "Negritude, structuralism, and deconstruction"[44] he easily and predictably drifts from structuralism into deconstruction as the most appealing post- structuralist paradigm. Rather than novelty of ideas, what one finds here instead is a mere "technology (theory)-transfer" mentality, which in a sense was the same with Senghor's more cleverly transfigured efforts.

What Senghor swept over with the mythifying vagueness of language, Anozie masks with his curious mathematical equations which Appiah equally observes with appropriate disdain. Incidentally, nobody could find enough courage or interest to try out the peculiar theoretical construct on the visual arts. There is little doubt what

possibilities exist in that direction in the explication and understanding of the semiotic structures of the individual art object, but as an encapsulating theory of culture without qualification it does not promise any better than any other of the great universalising fictions.

Anozie's own observation that "one cannot honestly claim that one particular theory or reading of a work of art can take precedence over all the others"[45] is not only paradoxical, given the deterministic language of his own theoretical postulations, it is also centrally relevant to the intention here to propose a more workable and realistic approach to the appreciation and interpretation of objects of African art irrespective of what epoch produced them.

The evident reality of African cultures is that, whatever convenience it may contain, they are bound to overwhelm and invalidate any grand narrative or prescript. To be properly understood they must be viewed from more than one totalising position. If we accept that art is a semiotic code, and that semiotic systems are culture-specific and hardly interchangeable even across open-frontiers, then we must see all totalising and homogenizing fictions as unrealistic and ultimately impedimental to meaningful reading.

However, while noting that these cultures defy a monocular or prescriptive model of interpretation, one must also observe that, by their culture-specificity semiotic systems inscribe within them asymmetric epistemic schema which accord the insider a privilege of knowledge, which knowledge Mukherjee means when he states that "one who has epistemological privilege, is some one who is a cultural insider".[46] Which is to say that those who are closest to a system or the ambience of a cultural product possess the advantage of the privileged eye, which does not invalidate the

semiotic pluralism of the object. While one is not about proposing y Gasset's Perspectivism or any exclusivising models here, in some sense there is a correlation. If we should see perspectivism as a principle of absolute subjectivism, we also see the possibility of a convergence of subjectivisms which by this process acquires relative objectivity, an element of shared yet subjective, knowledge. In the apprehension of culture and the practice of criticism, this shared subjectivism concretises into collective knowledge which invests in each member of the group a level of epistemological privilege. It should be noted that it is this group perspective which, in its original, creative form produces the material culture which is the subject of criticism.

Amuta has written that "in all traditional societies, theorising about aesthetics was not a distinct social undertaking divorced from the consumption and creation of art"[47] While this is not particularly correct in denying the existence of professional intellectual and philosophical practice in some African cultures like the Dogon for instance, it is correct on the correlation between art production and discourse. Segall and others have shown that art is a "product of behaviour"[48] and that behaviour is culture-specific. Perception, equally, is culture-bound. Each group develops within itself inscribed principles of cultural production and interpretation, its own theory of criticism, what Henry Louis Gates has called "a meta-discourse, a discourse about itself".[49] And, those who by their peculiar circumstances as members of the group are participants in the generation of this meta-discourse possess the unique insight which it invests. The meta-discourse becomes, in itself, a discourse of the self, a discourse of the collective "I and my circumstances".

Paulin Hountondji has stated, that "if theoretical discourse is to be meaningful

in (modern) Africa, it must promote within African society itself a theoretical debate of its own that is capable of developing its themes and problems autonomously instead of remaining a remote appendix to European theoretical and scientific debates"[50] For Hountondji's singulars one would indeed substitute plurals, as well as propose that the correct path and duty of theoretical discourse would be, perhaps, to find within the cultures themselves their own meta-discourse, the internally inscribed theories of interpretation.

Within these cultures are figures and forms which serve as tropes for the nature of reality, art, and interpretation, tropes which in themselves articulate the theoretical framework of internal discourse within the culture. One such trope found in many African cultures and which most appropriately articulates our reading of the nature of discourse and cultural practice in these cultures, in its structure, constitution, multi-manifestation, and the challenges it poses to reading, is the figure and form of the masquerade. In its multi-facetedness, its mutant essence, its defiance of perception from one standpoint, its unification of all art forms which makes it the art of all arts and thus the ultimate art form, the masquerade is a most fascinating figure for the signification of the true nature of art as well as the practice of interpretation in many African cultures. The masquerade provides structures for articulating one system in many, of approaching art in 20th century Africa; dynamic, multi-faceted, eclectic, regenerative, pluralistic in every sense of the concept, and demanding of articulation and appreciation. As the Igbo say, the masquerade cannot be fully appreciated standing in one place. In other words nobody appreciates it fully from a singular perspective, nor is any singular perspective superior to another especially since the masquerade is in constant mobility. To understand art in 20th

century Africa, as if to recall Anozie's observation, no one reading or manner of reading can claim supersedence over another. This theoretical outlook we see most explicitly signified in the living art of the masquerade.

THE MASQUERADE: A theory of African art

The figure of the masquerade remains one of the most visible and important topoi in the art of African societies. The occurrence of mask figures in the cave paintings of the Sahara point to the antiquity of the phenomenon.[51] On the other hand, the persistence of the tradition among several African peoples through the ages, even in the new world where it has blossomed against the backdrop of multi-ethnic societies, points to its importance in these cultures. Masking continues to occupy visual centre-space even where it has lost some of its original strength and significance, especially under the pressure of new religions. In other places, and the new world is again a good example, it has indeed gained from its contact with these religions and cultures, working out relationships of mutual perpetuation with them. In the Caribbean as well as in Brazil, masking traditions originating in Africa and taken to the Americas by slaves, have not only appropriated the religions of the new world and transformed into completely original and unique forms, they have also retained much of their peculiarities and informing principles.

Formalistically, the mask figure or masquerade is a combination of art forms, a convergence of genres. Even at its most austere, it exemplifies the highest levels of formalistic genius and sophistication. In the singular enactment is brought together sculpture, textile, painting, dance, the oral and, as Cole and Aniakor have

noted in some masquerades of the Igbo of Nigeria, the olfactory arts. In a sense, then, the masquerade is a grand assemblage, a meta-art. In its organisation and co-ordination not only of the forms of the individual art objects that make it up but also its overall structure, the masquerade at the same time replicates the genetics of the singular work, like the composition of a painting or a piece of music, or, even more aptly, the orchestral accompaniment which often is an integral part of its totality, as it presents the complexities of an epic text. The masquerade is thus a mother of the arts, standing in front to symbolise the entirety of the creative essence of the producing culture. Even without the conceptual dimension, the convergence of these parts, their masterly orchestration, effectively transform the masquerade from mere figure into essence, from text into living icon.

Perhaps even more important is the underlying principle of masking which is transmutation. Several studies exist on masking and the mask, the power of the mask to invest its wearer with a new nature, to transform him from the original self into the assumed, from the objective to the indeterminable, even thus subverting the objective reality of the original self and questioning its very being. At one extreme is the most basic and mundane form which has survived in the masks of Western culture where in divesting the wearer of his identity, the mask absolves him of responsibility, stands between him and his actions. In this state of alienation/dissociation from the public self, the truths of the private self, repressed under the pressures and threats of the public, are given room to manifest.[52] The hitherto passive object, a piece of paper with two holes fingernailed through it, upon assumption of its role as mask, equally assumes the performative power. As the orthodox objectivity of its being changes so does it in turn change that of the masker,

a case of transference of active essence. The piece of paper itself transforms into a mediating essence. In this one finds an analogy with the art object which, in yielding the original identity of its nature as wood or paper and assuming the essence of art, acquires the power of mediation between artist and public, between the private and the public. The work ceases to be merely a pattern of ink on paper and becomes an emotive objectivity with the power even of violence.

But the interaction here is between the private individual and the public space, between identity, action, and responsibility. On another level is the more complex and complicatory spirit masking of African societies where the mask is not merely an agent of the mutative persona but a concrete identity that occupies and appropriates the concreteness of its bearer in order to realise its own. If on the ordinary the pattern is that of the signifier, the sign, and the signified, in spirit masking a fourth dimension enters, that of the significand. While on the earlier level whereby the mask is used for the purpose of social distance, we may talk about the man (or woman) behind the mask, at this level we talk about the spirit behind the mask. The individual no longer exists, the shift is not between selves, the dialogue not between the outside and the within. There is a new presence, a recognisable identity made manifest.

In the four dimensions enumerated there are no two identities, no two selves, but one, the spirit figure. There are no three parties, the public, the masker, and the mask; only two exist here - the ancestor or deity, and the community. One does not guess and say, you are Mudgrave answering Brer Rabbit so your wife does not discover you are indulging in indecencies with Mrs Jones. The peculiarity of the situation is best illustrated in this dialogue between a masquerade and a member of

the masking cult recorded among the Awka Igbo:

Agaba: Do you know me?

Member: No! How can I know you? You are a spirit.

Agaba: Do you have a house for me?

Member: No! Humans and spirits don't live together.[53]

In this exchange, while the identity of the mask figure is shown to be indeterminate, on another level it is shown as clearly recognisable. Yet, rather than simplify it for reading, rather than make absolute its concreteness, this is perpetually complicated by a number of factors. The first is this inherent indeterminacy of the recognisable spirit figure: because he operates outside the human arena, manifesting only occasionally, we can only know little about him. The society member answers the spirit's question above by saying, no, how can we know you? In this case the *Agaba* is known. It bears one of any of the many code names which such spirits wear, like *Idejuogwugwu;* "When the flood fills a pit." Yet none of these is enough to reveal the complete identity of the spirit-manifest. The figure standing and dancing before the public, is the ancestor. Any physical inflictions on him are direct, and the repercussions are clear. As the mask figure steps into the public, he becomes spirit. He is what he is called.

Cole and Aniakor give another example. The Ijele masquerade of the central Igbo is perhaps the largest, most grandiose masquerade in the world. It stands five and a half meters high and two and a half metres in girt and figurates the elephant, the trope of grandeur and visibility. Before it steps into the public space, the Ijele is specially assembled by the commissioned artist who, after his job is done, consecrates the new being thus:

You have now become what you are called, mmanwu, Ijele.[54]

With these words the masquerade ceases to be object and becomes a living spirit, and "may venture forth with dignity into the public arena." But then, after his brief existence among men, a man emerges from within his being, the "carrier of the spirit", and is congratulated. So the spirit is, and then he is not. If anything is absolute here, it is indeterminacy.

In most cases, the spirit figure further underlines this ineluctability by his performative idiosyncrasies. Robert Farris Thompson has observed in Yoruba Egungun masquerades what he calls "a sense of distortion, suggesting origin from another world."[55] The trickster Egungun, according to Thompson, "deliberately astonish people with their rapid fire transformations, from human into snake, for instance..in a frenetic and hilarious demonstration of the African taste for role-switching."[56] One may state that Thompson is grossly simplifying things here, and thus misses the greater underlying significance. Although role switching is in the nature of the trickster figure, this is not particularly peculiar, and what we see in this case is not mere role switching as in an act, but a manifestation of essence, the intrinsic shiftiness of the masquerade figure, and in extension, an underlining of the elusiveness of text. There is a suggestion of multiple identity, but there is only one identity which defies and actively subverts transfixion and singular interpretation. How can we know you, you are a spirit!

In other cases this changeling essence is realised through mobility which not only nullifies the photographic moment but at times completely defies it. One example is the age grade masks of the Bayaka of Zaire. Duerden observes that "the

whole form of this mask is adapted to a gyrating movement which conceals the features until the mask comes to a standstill".[57] In this act of manifestation, the mask figure plays out the truth of its indeterminate essence. Another example is the Igbo Ogbazulu Obodo masquerade, specially known for its lightning speed. Ogbazulu Obodo exists in the darkness of night and realises its legendary nature through the technique of several strategically placed relay runners who, though unmasked, play out its signature sound so it acquires the 'semblance' of swift transition from village to village. This other element, the fact that the mask spirit is, in reality, only an orchestration of darkness and sound, realised through a multiplicity of humans who act as vehicles, is in itself very significant. In less mysterious examples, the performance of the masquerade, the movement in space and the deliberate definition and subsequent destruction of patterns, like the swirl in the air, for instance, play out an incorporeality which signifies this mutant essence.

In most masquerades too, one sees an even more problematic situation, the congregation of a multiplicity of ancestral or spirit beings in one figure. In Igbo male spirit masquerades, "multiple spiritual essences are concentrated and combined with different formulae for each mask - to manifest different spirit powers and identities".[58] Otherwise, though mask figures may belong to what one might qualify as a class, each individual mask figure within the group or genre still has an autonomy, an underlined individuality which invalidates all stereotyping. In other words the masquerade itself deliberately subverts reading so as to re-emphasise the complex nature of interpretation. As a system the masquerade points to each culture's recognition of this complexity.

Not to be ignored is the other dimension of the mask figure, as a

conglomerate of signs, visual and performative. As a totality, the mask figure is, as we indicated earlier, in one the sign, the signified, the signifier, as well as the *significand*. Each part thereof, also, is a sign in itself, the maskhead, the costume, the dance step, the accompaniment. Yet again we find on parts of these parts other signs, like the spiral on the Kibawa of the Tabwa. The central cosmological motif of the Tabwa, the spiral, defines the frame of the beaded mask and the cone shell disks - *mpande* - which, according to one myth signifies the moon, "the eyes of Kibawa", a chthonic spirit who dwells in a sacred, spiral cavern. Kibawa, according to Roberts, is an earth spirit which entered the pantheon of the Tabwa in the 19th century during a period of trial and hardship. Kibawa became for the group a guardian spirit and figure of resistance against colonial invasion and the corrosion of the Tabwa personality and nation. The spirit is believed to have offered to help them on the condition that they desist from speaking Swahili, the language of occupation. "As an invention of distressed and concerned Tabwa actors, Kibwa's role was to facilitate adaptation to the signs of a new social universe by introducing the highly personal cathartic triumph of spirit possession".[59] It is this body of history and cosmogony which is signified in the frame of the kibwa mask and the beaded spiral on the maskhead. Yet the entire masquerade also, is an iconic object signifying not only the practice of divination and spirit possession and the individual autonomy and self realisation which this brings to the spirit possessed, but also the guardian spirit itself, the figure of anti-colonial resistance and cultural preservation.

For every masquerade the performative act, the dance step, the manipulation of space, the conjectural utilisation of anatomy, is a sign. The Ejagham Ekpe masquerade not only signifies the leopard, the iconic motif of power and authority,

in its form but also in its performative evocation of the leopard essence. When it leaps into the air, the Ekpe enacts a sign. Cole and Aniakor have observed the unique definition of space in the performance of an Igbo maiden spirit dance. The maskers divide the arena in two by walking an imaginary middle line, traced with the delicacy of a graphic act. This path of the spirits reinforces the iconic essence of the spirit figure. The object and the act become a fusion of sign and event. Here art as a totality fuses in a system of signification. Dieterlen summarises this when she observes of masking and discourse among the Dogon; "masks, as well as the costumes, ornaments, accessories, mimes, songs, rhythms, and dances that accompany them, can be integrated into the cosmogony, mythology, and history."[60] She recalls Dogon philosopher Ogotemmeli's submission to Griaule in 1947. "The society of masks," Ogotommeli said, "is the entire world. And when it moves onto the public square it dances the step of the world, it dances the system of the world. Because all men, all occupations, all foreigners, all animals are carved into masks or woven into hoods".[61]

The masquerade is therefore a meta-narrative, a body of 'scriptures' further mythicised and sophisticatedly configured by its inherent multivalency. As a particularly difficult system, the masquerade elicits equally sophisticated bodies of critical theory and discourse. Whatever intricacies of thought construct these scriptures also erect appropriate interpretative systems. Farris Thompson notes in the preface to his work on motion in African arts that among the Ejagham and Banyang of Nigeria and Western Cameroon, during preparations for initiations, candidate-initiates are given lessons in the iconography of the oracle mask, the Basinjom, where they are required to identify its parts and their meanings. However,

although the mask outfit is stationary during this exercise, it is additionally "moored magically" by the placement of two rifles crossed over it, "an image of arrested motion."[62] In this the Ejagham provide us with a most revealing instruction on the practice of reading and interpretation by recognising that, even in a state of stasis, the work of art, the text, is intrinsically elusive and would require the extremity of magic to be arrested or ultimately revealed.

The Dogon employ a system of double-speak with layers of speech in the interpretation of masking and mythology. The first rung of critical language is the "front speech" used for children, non- initiates, and strangers. "Front speech" provides what we may call the face-value or non-figurative layer of meaning in discourse, what the Dogon qualify as "simple knowledge".[63] A higher rung of language use is called the "speech of the world" or "clear speech", the language of internal discourse closed to all but "highly instructed men and women, to those who are in charge of a section of Dogon society, to initiates responsible for a cult, and to those who persevere in penetrating more deeply into Dogon knowledge."[64] The language of shallow discourse is anecdotal, that of deep interpretation philosophical, and each masking phenomenon can be interpreted at both levels, each level relating to "the level of knowledge of their hearers, and to their willingness to be taught." The healer mask, for instance, is at once the mask that heals the sick, and, at the deeper level of signification, the primal healer who attended to the *walu*. The "old woman" mask represents the aged, but, above this level, she signifies the primordial ancestor who was deputy to Amma and played an important role in Dogon migration. The Dogon recognise and emphasise this "multiplicity of meanings", as Dieterlen calls it, as an inherent essence of the work of art, the text, and of the

world. As the masquerade is "the entire world", according to Ogotommeli, so are all objects of critical discourse multivalent, 'undecideable' as Derrida would have it, existing at a multiplicity of levels and susceptible to a multiplicity of readings.

The phenomenon of the masquerade is relevant to the student of African art in this century in a number of other ways. One of these is the element of eclecticism. Masking traditions in Africa show a long-standing and consistent pattern of eclecticism both in their forms and in their underlying concepts and cult patronage. Mask figures and traditions shift and move from culture to culture with or without modification. Features are transferred from one masking form in one area to another in another cultural environment. In his study of Ekpeye masking in Nigeria, John Picton notes that "mask forms, cultforms, artstyles, belief systems and parts thereof, entire assemblages of cultpractices, and the names of particular forms...are each capable of being copied or borrowed whether as individual elements or in packages of variable composition"[65]. Christopher Roy writes that the southern Bwa of the Volta region of Bourkina Faso acquired their wooden masks from the Nunuma to the North through theft and purchase.[66] Stories are told of raids during which they burnt down distant villages and stole masks which they later integrated into their own masking traditions. The Bwa acquired not only the mask forms but their underlying concepts as well. But once these forms and concept are acquired, they become localised, and thenceforth belong to the group. Though Roy notes that some Bwa consider the introduction of wooden masks in place of their earlier grass ones heresy, this is more a rare and unique case of cultural chauvinism than a pattern, given the widespread nature of the eclectic practice. Once an acquisition is made, it becomes part of the appropriating culture and seldom are theories of originality or

authenticity erected. This re-establishes that eclecticism and appropriation are accepted practices in all societies and effectively invalidate distinctions between the "authentic" and the acquired.

Another element, related the above, is that of novelty. Masking in African societies show a tradition of perpetual innovation and renovation. Not only are new forms introduced into existing structures, completely new structures are consistently being erected in line with changes and developments in society. Thus new masquerades are all the time appearing, not only to replace old ones, but also to swell their numbers, to emphasise the pluralistic nature of both the masking tradition and the producing cultures. Cole and Aniakor have found masquerades with such names as "Bishop" and "World Cup" among the Igbo recently, and Dieterlen has pointed out others with names like "tourist" and "madame" among the Dogon. John Picton reports of a mask by the name of John Wayne among the Ebira of Nigeria. Among the Yoruba, Epa masks are incorporating images of bicycles, automobiles, and muslim clerics into the maskheads. None of these questions the "Africanity" of a maskhead, given also that in these societies no such concept is recognised. If anything is permanent here, then, it is the element of change, and this is a long-standing tradition which has produced today what would be classified classical by narrow paradigms tomorrow.

The argument here is that the masquerade is the quintessential art object and as a trope reveals patterns of cultural practice and production evident in most African art, without chronological or pseudo-ideological categorisation. As a form it is replicated in other art forms - undecideable, mobile, transitory, transient, eclectic and yet culture-specific, contemporaneous as it is 'traditional'. The attending

structures of discourse, in addition to the mask figure itself as a body of discourse, show most clearly the correct relationship between art and appreciation, between cultural production and interpretation. And these structures we see as very appropriate for the understanding and proper analysis of art in these societies. Within the framework of this model there is neither traditional nor modern or contemporary African art, neither the authentic nor inauthentic, only a continuum which assimilates time and history even as it is assimilated by these, bearing within the present both the future and the past.

The masquerade signifies the invalidity of absolutes: nothing is just the way it is, nothing just the way it is said to be. Every cultural system is polysemic, and as such requires a polygonal frame for interpretation, a structure of double-speak, if it must be appreciably comprehended. The masquerade itself is exemplar of a multivalent, polyglottic for the interpretation of reality. The world is beyond constriction or circumscription because, as the Igbo maintain, the world also, is a dancing masquerade.[67] Where one thing stands, there stands another, and nothing must stand that leaves no room for another. Not only does the masquerade change from season to season, taking in new objects, parts, ideas, talents, dirt, it also changes even as it tumbles in the air or charges the crowd. No masquerade is the same from one moment to another. In its physical and conceptual movement, and the cyclicity of this movement, in its elusive, incircumscribable, essence, are signified the true nature of culture and art from society to society. In this is inscribed a veritable critical model, a body, in Louis Gates's words, of "instruction for the act of interpretation."

The masquerade defies and nullifies the Grand Narrative. It both exemplifies

as well as exhorts a multiplicity of narratives; no explanation totally and finally appropriates it in all its complexities. As Dieterlen notes of the levels of Dogon interpretation, "all the levels are valid".[68] Discourse is wisely kept in the realm of the speculative, for not even to the initiate is all knowledge revealed.

In proffering the masquerade as a theory of African cultural practice and interpretation, one thus presents a theory of theories. The masquerade already establishes a model for any other theories or interpretative tools as required for specific systems or cultural epochs. This has a number of implications for an inquiry such as ours, and for art historical practice generally. First, our position is that the individual artist and the specific culture and tendency are the most feasible entities for any meaningful appreciation. Where patterns exist within the culture, these may serve as workable and convenient parameters, given that it is recognised that such patterns do not constitute an absolutism and that the contradictory and exceptional are unavoidable. We will in fact, in due course, try to locate a part of Egonu's *oeuvre* within a cultural pattern. However, this is so only because there is a discernible affinity to a pattern, for neither is this intractable nor is it even necessary.

Within the frame of our theory Egonu, and indeed any other African artist, fits into his or her cultural identity without contest irrespective of the nature of their work. If diversity, eclecticism, and unarrestable dynamism both formal and temporal, are the consistents of African cultures - and we do not suggest that this is peculiar to only African cultures or that it rules out the possibility of elements of stasis, as we have already implied - then no form or tendency is alienable. And if cultural identity is predicated upon form and tendency - style - then it ceases to exist within the contestable. To try to locate an artist within a tendency in his or her culture,

therefore, is not to erect a master-narrative for that culture but to indulge in the legitimate business of art historical inquiry. To seek patterns remains a part of art historical practice. To erect them is outside its legitimate confines[69]. To suggest that Egonu's work is identifiable with a dominant tendency in Igbo art, for instance, and to find a number of other artists from within the culture working in equally identifiable manner, is hardly enough premise to propose *the* theory of late 20th century Igbo art, let alone that of African art.

The further implication of this is that art history may talk about 20th century African art as a chronological convenience rather than venture into invalid categories and paradigms or seek divergent theories for such categories. With this in mind, inquiry thus begins with the individual artist and his or her work and if necessary extends outwards rather the other way round. The individual artist becomes not only the focus but essentially the locus of inquiry. This removes the differences theories have erected between forms of African art.

Third, since it is our position that art appreciation must work within the boundaries of the conjectural and the suggestive, it follows also that all conclusions must be left open to contest. Whatever we discern in this study, therefore, can only be located within the speculative. In the long run meaning must be seen to reside in the object of art, not in interpretation.

In looking at Egonu's art, as we shall in the following chapters, one must take the position of spectator at a masquerading act, an act which not only reflects the creator and his essentially complex background, but also exists in itself as a body of discourse deserving of critical attention. Not only does the artist effect a disappearing act in a work of art by embeding its essence and the workings of his own mind

within it, the work itself posseses a presence independent of the artist which analogises it with a masquerade, and to come close to a comprehension of this entity requires a multiplicity of positions and manners of 'looking'.

To view the artist this way is to recognise the defects of tools that merely stack artists and their work into little, totalising straitjackets of convenience. It is also to acknowledge the futility of definitive reading and supreme fictions.

Notes

1. It was Ulli Beier who created the term, contemporary African art in his pioneer study, *Contemporary Art in Africa* [London: Pall Mall, 1968]

2. Beier oversaw the workshops in Ibadan and Oshogbo, Nigeria in the early and mid-sixties that produced what is now known as Oshogbo art. His narration of this experiment, however, has remained defensive and consistently emphasises the 'naivety' of the artists while constructing a theory of "originality" and non-exposure to "the rigidities of European academic training" round their work. Beier has pointedly ignored criticism of the Oshogbo experiment and his interpretative constructs round it. See the updated hagiography in Beier, *Thirty Years of Oshogbo Art* [Bayreuth: Iwalewa Haus, 1991].

3. In this respect, Susan Vogel's *Africa Explores* [New York: Center for African Art, 1991] is slightly progressive in containing a few essays, contestable and deserving of ambivalence as they are, which at least depart from the pattern of historical overview-and-biographies initiated by Beier and as yet unassailed except in discourse on white South African art.

4. Ulli Beier, *Three Yoruba Artists* [Bayreuth: University of Bayreuth African Studies Series, 1988]

5. Elsbeth Court's very recent article, 'Pachipamwe II: The *Avant Garde* in Africa, *African Arts*, January 1992, on the neo-Cyrene workshops in Southern Africa does not fail to note, quite painstakingly, which artist possesses a first school leaving certificate and which a diploma. The essence is not in any particular different from Beier's emphases on the Oshogbo artists's poor education, although in this case most of the artists happen to be rather highly educated. Such details are of course necessary to define the 'uniqueness' [Otherness] of the object of contemplation.

6. While this argument may be subtle today, its appeal has hardly diminished. In 'Modern Nigerian Art in an International Context', his presentation at the Terms of Art Symposium in Dusseldorf in November 1991, Hermann Pollig requalified it under the expression, 'original examples of artistic expression'[p.5], and Jan Houte, artistic director of the 1992 Documenta IX informed the symposium that this was the criterion of his selection team for selecting African participants in 'the most important contemporary art show in the world.'

7. Frank McEwen, 'Return to Origin: New Directions for African Artists', *African Arts*, Vol. 1, No. 2, 1968, pp. 18-25, 88. McEwen dwells upon his knowledge of the pathetic conditions and history of his new discoveries, just as pointed in Beier's narratives of the Oshogbo experiment but on a grander scale; "A compartmented, conscious mind had replaced a unified religious instinct, leaving far behind ... a still psychic and visionary Africa... Today, Africa, lacking traditions, is burning with desire for expression, demanding outlet... it is a tragedy to witness in Africa so vast a squandering of artistic essence which requires an umbrella of protection." It is this claim to transcedent cognition, as Biodun Jeyifo has described it, of epistemic authority, which lays the ground for, and is ultimately called in to justify, colonialist cultural interventionism. It is interesting that the tone of McEwen's report is so strongly echoed in the Elsbeth Court article referred to above.

8. He concludes: "Without intelligent engagement and understanding, this upsurge may, by circumstances, be led into negative, uncertain paths." Ibid., p. 22. It thus becomes the logical duty of the contemplator to step in as a Messaiah and provide the needed guidance to save the situation.

9. Pierre Romain-Desfosses, founder of the Atelier d'Art "Le Hangar" d'Elisabethville, the French-African version of these workshops equally spoke of his pupils creativity issuing from "pure and fresh sources" and encouraged them to grasp the world around them "without referring to this or that notion of faith - or superstition" [Quoted in V. Y. Mudimbe, 'Reprendre', in Vogel, p. 278] Mudimbe notes that Romain - Desfosses "and all his white colleagues had a number of things in common: they consciously assumed the role of the father figure...and they invited the local artists they considered capable of growing into a discipline that, by digging into blurred or *forgotten memories*, could bring forth new arguments and ideas" [emphasis mine.]

10. James Clifford, 'The Others: Beyond the 'Salvage' Paradigm', *Third Text*, 6, Spring 1989, pp. 73-77.

11. Ibid., p. 74.

12. Beier, *Thirty Years*, p. 6.

13. Babatunde Lawal, 'The Search for Identity in Contemporary Nigerian Art', *Studio International*, 1976.

14. Beier, op. cit., p. 6.

15. See above reference.

16. The grand narrative of this school is Vogel's *Africa Explores* which begins to deconstruct itself and show itself as a further revision of the old paradigms right from its gleeful title. Eddy Chambers has called attention to the signifying dimensions of this title, and it is clear how, while it appears to contradict the Levi-Straussian paradigm of stasis in 'cold' cultures by headlining evidence of predilection to change, it does not successfully detach itself since only such paradigm can produce the thrill of discovery which the title embodies.

17. Keith Nicklin, *Yoruba* [London: Horniman Museum, 1991]

18. In 'Anish Kapoor: The Darkness Inside a Stone', *Anish Kapoor*, catalogue of the British Pavilion, XLIV Venice Biennale [The British Council, 1990], Thomas McEvilley erects an elaborate frame of postmodernist transgressions which strain to resituate Kapoor's work within a poorly articulated Indian and post-colonial aesthetic but the essence of which is to exclude him, as it effectively does, from the space of Modernism. In 'The Selfhood of the Other', his contribution to Vogel's *Africa Explores* [op. cit., pp. 266-275], McEvilley pushes further this post-modernist fiction which simply absolves modernist history by erecting a dichotomy of etic/emic cultures, and by taking on the etic/modernist keeps modernism to himself while valorising post-modernism, that 'non-name' in his words which finds space for the Other by 'recognising' his difference, which is to say, re-underlining his difference. There is a concrete affinity between this definition of post-modernism and the Apartheid cultural policy of separate development.

19. Victor Burgin, *The End of Art Theory: Criticism and Postmodernity* [London: Macmillan Education Ltd, 1986] p. 165.

20. Chinua Achebe's essay, 'Colonialist Criticism' in Achebe, *Morning Yet On Creation* Day [London: Heinemann, 1975] best articulates this exchange. Others who have contributed to it include Abiola Irele, Babatunde Lawal [op. cit.,], Joseph Okpaku ['Tradition, Culture and Criticism', *Presence Africaine*, 20, 1969], Wole Soyinka, and Kofi Antubam ['From Ghana Folk Art to Kofi Antubam Art', exhibition catalogue, 1962]

21. In *Thirty Years of Oshogbo Art* Beier makes oblique but scornful reference to critics who in the past were highly critical of Oshogbo art but now write monographs on the artists. The essence is to undermine the integrity of these critiques by presenting them as merely resentful.

22. African cultural criticism in the late sixties and the seventies was spent in this loop of contests for space with the expatriate critic. Okpaku's critique [op. cit.], and later those of the Nigerian troika of Chinweizu et al, and Achebe brought this battle to a head but did not in any way end it.

23. This has changed considerably in literary criticism, but in the visual arts little progress has been made since criticism and scholarship in this area is still prominently in the hold of expatriates.

24. Achebe, 'Colonialist Criticism', op. cit., p. 7.

25. A most recent example is signified in the formation of a group of newspaper critics and young art commentators in Lagos called the "Committee for Relevant Art" the purpose of which is to determine what art is "relevant" and what not in Nigeria. Information on this from personal communication with the leader of the group, the art journalist Toyin Akinosho, 1992.

26. Nigerian art historian Ola Oloidi has worked in this area though his criticism is not widely available outside Nigeria. See, for example, Ola Oloidi, 'Elitism and Modern African Artists', *Nigeria* Magazine, Nos. 134-135, 1981, pp. 71-84.

27. See chapter one.

28. See chapter one.

29. A non-name, as McEvilley describes it. See ref. above. Jencks ['Postmodernism and late Modernism: The Essential Definitions' R. Kostelanetz, ed., *Esthetics Contemporary*, New York: Prometheus Books, 1989, p. 287] describes it as "'nothing' Postmodernism where little is at stake... They just adopted a current phrase for discontinuity and lumped every departure under it." Where we beg to differ from Jencks is of course on how much is at stake.

30. For an elaboration of this argument see, among others, Nelly Richard, 'Postmodernism and Periphery', *Third Text*, No. 2, Winter 1987/88, pp. 5-12.

31. Distinction of course needs be made of the essential semantic/ political variances that lean on the provenance of this qualifier; the fact that a discourse of dichotomies continues within the 'periphery' on these lines, and the term possesses a different, indeed empowering signification within this space, itself not totally free of the transgressive manipulations of the 'centre'. See Geeta Kapur, 'Tradition and Modernity in Third World Fine Arts', paper delivered at the Third Havana Biennale, Cuba, 1989. Later published as 'Contemporary Cultural Practice: Some Polemical Categories', Third *Text, No. 11*, Summer 1990, pp. 109-117.

32. Vogel's *Africa Explores* is unique in bringing together all of these grand narratives into one supposedly homogenous body of theorisation.

33. Vogel employs a number of African participants in herproject, just as a few Yoruba scholars are now beginning to contribute chapters to American revisions of Yoruba art history. The practice deserves closer scrutiny, though, since it fits well into the postmodernist pattern of appropriation [including appropriation of 'peripheral' intellect] and could be seen in the Paul Simon music project in Southern Africa, and the employment of more black voice-

overs by white musicians. The induction of the outsider of course helps legitimise the pattern of discourse, but even more importantly, it shows how the object of pastiche under postmodernism is not only the cultural object but also the cultural producer. In a sense postmodernism has initiated a neo-colonisation of intellect.

34. Victor Burgin, op. cit., p. 204.

35. Ibid., p. 202.

36. It deserves to be mentioned that part of the African response to expatriate theories of African culture in the late sixties and the seventies was to generate series of home-spun mega-narratives, some of which we shall discuss here.

37. Chidi Amuta, *The Theory of African Literature* [London: Zed Press, 1989] p. 41.

38. See Herbert Marcuse, *The Aesthetic Dimension: Toward a Critique of Marxist Aesthetics* [London: Macmillan, 1978]

39. Amuta, op. cit., p. 66.

40. In conversation John Picton has noted that within the context of the base/superstructure model, a relationship could be established here, but I doubt that this is feasible within the frames of an "imperialist" aesthetic since what is involved here is no longer merely a schema of capital/national bourgeoisie - patronage - artist, but an all embracing anti-imperialist mega-aesthetic which is only a fiction of Third World Marxian orthodoxy.

41. Sunday Anozie, *Structural Models and African Poetics: Towards a Paradigmatic Theory of Literature* [London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1981]

42. Anthony Appia in Henry Louis Gates, Jr., ed., *Black Literature and Literary Theory* [New York: Methuen, 1984] pp. 127-149.

43. John S. Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy* [London: Heinemann, 1969]

44. Sunday Anozie in Henry Louis Gates, Jr., op. cit., pp. 105- 125.

45. Ibid., p. 117.

46. Arun P. Mukherjee, 'Whose Post-Colonialism and Whose Postmodernism?', *World Literature Written in English*, Vol. 30, No. 2, 1990, pp. 1-9.

47. Chidi Amuta, *The Theory of African Literature*, p. 49.

48. See Marshall H. Segall, 'Visual art: some perspectives from cross-cultural psychology' in Don Brothwell and C. H. Waddington, eds., *Beyond Aesthetics* [London: Thames and Hudson, 1976] p. 98.

49. Henry Louis Gates, Jr., *The Signifying Monkey: A Theory of African-American Literary Criticism* [New York/ Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988]

50. Quoted in Henry Louis Gates, Jr. Ibid., p. xx.

51. In his *Masks of Black Africa* [New York: Dover Publications,1976] Ladislav Segy gives a concise history of masks and masking in which he notes their occurrence both in African prehistory as well as in the courts of Egypt.

52. Segy extends this argument, quite appropriately, by pointing to the role of a uniform in modern society, for instance a judge's wig or a policeman's uniform which, beside the given authority of position, act to underline this as well as establish the appropriate change of identity/responsibility required in the execution of public service. Thus the robe transforms "the individual personality into an impersonal institution of law", an act which is essentially a masking act. See Segy p. 4.

53. Herbert M. Cole and Chike Aniakor, *Igbo Arts: Community and Cosmos* [Los Angeles: UCLA, 1984] p. 131.

54. Ibid., p. 140.

55. Robert F. Thompson, *African Art in Motion* [Los Angeles: UCLA, 1973] p. 222.

56. Ibid., p. 222.

57. Dennis Duerden, *African Art: An Introduction* [London: Hamlyn, 1974] p. 47.

58. Cole and Aniakor, *Igbo Arts*, p. 134.

59. Allen F. Roberts, 'Tabwa Masks: An Old Trick of the Human Race', *African Arts*, 1991, p. 42.

60. Germaine Dieterlen, 'Masks and Mythology Among the Dogon', African Arts, Vol.XXII, No. 3, pp. 34-43, 87.

61. See Marcel Griaule, *Dieu d'Eau: entretiens avec Ogotemmeli*, 1948, translated as *Conversations with Ogotemmeli* [London/Oxford/ New York: Oxford University Press 1965]

62. Robert F. Thompson, op. cit., p. xii.

63. Germaine Dieterlen in Griaule, *Conversations with Ogotemmeli*, p. xv.

64. Germaine Dieterlen, 'Masks and Mythology among the Dogon', African Arts, p.34.

65. John Picton, 'Ekpeye Masks and Masking', *African Arts*, Vol. xxxi, No. 2, February 1988, pp. 52- 53>

66. Christopher D. Roy, 'The Spread of Mask Styles in the Black Volta Basin', *African Arts*, Vol. xx, No. 4, 1987, p. 40.

67. Chinua Achebe and Ulli Beier, *The World is A Dancing Masquerade: Conversations* [Bayreuth: Iwalewa Haus, 1991] p. 1.

68. Germaine Dieterlen, 'Masks and Mythology...', p. 40.

69. See Berel Lang, *Art and Enquiry* [Detroit: Wayne StateUniversity, 1975] p. 33.

Chapter Three

EGONU: THE LIFE AND CAREER

William Uzo Egonu was born on Christmas day, 1931, in the port town of Onitsha on the bank of the Niger, to Henry Chukwuma Egonu, a civil servant with the colonial administration, and Alice Atibese Nanna Egonu who came from among the minority people of Koko in the Niger delta.[1] The Egonus lived in Otu, the "waterside village" quarters of the city where immigrants lived. The original peoples of the "waterside village" are believed to be descendants of migrants from Osomari, a neighbouring people who had themselves originally migrated from among the royal kingdom of Igala to the North-east of Onitsha as itinerant traders and settled by the Niger.[2] It was in Osomari that Henry Egonu was born, and his own father, Egonu Akubueze, was the war chief. Akubueze had played a crucial role in the early encounters between the people of the region and the British, as well as in the advent of Christianity in the lower Niger.

The earliest formal visit of the British to Onitsha was in 1854 when the expedition under Dr Baikie came down along the Niger and stopped off to have audience with the King, Obi Akazua.[3] The king reportedly welcomed the expedition and granted them rights to establish schools and sites to build their church. Trade relations were initiated, and the West African Company, the colonial trading company established a post for business in local produce in exchange for European goods. Despite the generosities of the Obi, however, the people remained suspicious

of the British and their relationships with them remained tricky and short-fused. By accounts, the Christian mission grew considerably in the brief period of its establishment, and there were settlements of British subjects near the Niger. Later in the year of 1854, however, the simmering tension between the people of Onitsha and the British came to a head when, dissatisfied with the alien presence and uncertain of its implications, a band of armed citizens assaulted streamers sailing the river, leading to a spate of attacks on the British. The encounter quickly developed into an unrest during which the mission premises were destroyed and the British consul in Lagos was brought in to consult with the chiefs. The consul chose to come in a gunboat, the *HMS Pioneer*, and, seeing this as an affront, the leaders of the kingdom declined to discuss with the colonial consul. In the night of the same day, while the consul was aboard the gunboat anchored off the shore, local citizens attacked, wounding the captain. The next day the British unleashed their mortars on the city and destroyed a large portion of it, claiming the mission in the carnage.

At Osomari, however, the Christian mission seemed to make a greater progress, though not for long. The missionaries did return in the 1870s, but it did not take long for the ancient antagonisms between the Anglican and the Catholic sects, which they could not leave behind in Britain, to manifest. In 1899 the Anglican mission suffered a serious setback in Osomari when the entire congregation, under the leadership of Akubueze, Egonu's grand father, defected *en masse* to Catholicism. After engineering the establishment of the mission in Oguta, another major neighbouring port city, Akubueze would eventually take up the titular position of the Generalissimo of Osomari.

Akubueze Egonu's assumption of titular power was itself centre of a major

controversy in 1931. His bid to succeed to the office was contested by another candidate from the ward who was older and therefore had the rightful claim to the title. But Egonu, wealthy, educated, young and well known, with royal connections and an excellent education behind him, would not cede the title.[4] According to the political historian Ikenna Nzimiro, "because he [Akubueze] was a wealthy person and could buy the support of other people, his intention was to win the contest so as to change the principle of succession based on seniority of age, and throw the title open to men of wealth and influence".[5] A powerful and well-placed personality whose name translates into "wealth is royalty", Egonu was aggressive, flamboyant, and broad-minded, eager to return the traditional link between title taking and personal achievement and responsibility, which is observed among the generality of the Igbo,[6] rather than accept the system of hereditary peerage which was in place in Osomari. When he could not do this, he won enough support to have himself inaugurated as the Iyase, in defiance, while the town went ahead also to inaugurate the elder man. Thus were two war chieves installed in Osomari and caused to reign till Egonu's death in 1937.[7]

Egonu was one of the earliest parents in the Onitsha area to send their sons to school. When Samuel Ajayi Crowther, Bishop on the Niger and founder of the first successful Christian missions in Nigeria, opened up the earliest western school in Onitsha in 1858, only little girls were allowed by their parents to attend. By Crowther's own account the boys preferred to walk the woods, hunt, do manly work in the farm and fish, and when they came to the classrooms it was only to mock the girls and their funny lessons, "as if it were a thing only fit for females and too much confining to them as free rovers of the fields".[8] Although Crowther, a Yoruba whose

slave parents had upon freedom chosen to relocate in Sierra Leone, was known for the poetic hyperbolism of his accounts, there was understandable reluctance on the part of parents to let out their grown children and the boys since they were not only needed in the farm and in the house, but could not also be entrusted to aliens whose mission was not all too clear, especially with their record of brutality and violence. A great city and kingdom like Onitsha could not easily hand over a generation or its children to outsiders.

By the turn of the century, though the Christian missions were more firmly established and the people of Onitsha sought greater commercial presence and activity, the situation had not chnaged much. Egonu, however, is reputed to have provided the piece of land on which one of the earliest elementary schools, St. Joseph's, was built. His grand son would later study in the school. The elder Egonu was a much broad-minded man with a pragmatic attitude to the growing modernisation which he encouraged as leader of the church in Osomari. His own son he sent to be trained not only in the institutions in Onitsha, but also in the elite academy of Fourah Bay in Freetown, Sierra Leone where the Christian mission trained the emergent but crop of local intelligentsia whom it subsequently recruited into positions in the church or the civil service of the British Protectorates. As more and more young people from Onitsha and the environs acquired western education especially at the highly regarded Fourah Bay, they began to fill in lower and middle positions in the civil service previously occupied by the more well educated migrants from Sierra Leone and Lagos.[9]. As powerful men in the running of the colony, they stood tall among their own people, and commanded both respect great respect.

Henry Egonu was an impassioned man of strong carriage.[10] By his son's own

recollections, he was of average weight, and about five feet nine inches tall. He was a rational and calculating man whose very philosophical attitude to situations his son attributes to his training and job as an administrator. Well-exposed and possessed of a creative inclination, he designed his own house which, unfortunately, was destroyed several years later in the sack of Onitsha during the Biafra war. He was also a clean-cut man with an eye for fashion who ordered and received fashion catalogues from mail-shops in England. By his son's recollection too, he was a kind and caring father.

Broad-minded and pragmatic as his father, he married from outside his own group. A few years after, however, his broad-mindedness and dedication to his family proved inadequate to save his marriage. Egonu's mother, Atibese, came from among the riverine peoples on the Western side of the Niger. She was slim and tall, standing at the same height as her husband. Egonu recalls that she was thought by her neighbours to be 'too tall for a woman':

> In those days women from her place were known to have a very aesthetic sense of dressing in their own regional attire. I cannot remember seeing her in western frock or shoes. Her footwear were typically Nigerian (sandals of various patterns and shoes with soles of leather and the top woven with colourful wool).[11]

Coming from another group, however, she was seen by the family as an outsider who either had to adapt her ways to suit the local population or find her marriage unworkable. She, on her own part, found it difficult to adjust to the ways of her husband's people. Although the Egonus had a history of receptivity to outsiders and to change, and although Henry Egonu had studied abroad and was much travelled and thus willing to make a success of his marriage, all these could not lighten for his wife the burden of existing among a hostile people. Among the Igbo,

the wife is not only her husband's but that of the community as well, and thus must of necessity adjust enough to meet the expectations and norms of the group. In this Atibese Egonu seemed too proud to succeed, and so, shortly after the birth of their second son, Hugh, the marriage collapsed and she moved away to Lagos. Shortly after this too, Henry Egonu moved to Calabar where he continued in his job with the colonial administration. Uzo was put in the care of his grandmother, and when his father remarried, he lived with his step-grandmother.

Onitsha in 1930 was not only the "high road to the heart of the Ibo nation" as The Reverend Adjayi Crowther described it in 1857,[12] but also a spectacular modern city. The novelist Chinua Achebe who was born in Ogidi, only a few miles away, tells the story of an exotic and sprawling metropolis where all cultures and peoples from across West Africa met and mingled, each people bringing with them their own exuberances and colour. "Whenever I think of it," wrote Achebe, "a phrase from Frantz Fanon comes to my mind: 'a zone of occult instability'"[13]

Despite its tragic encounters with the British, Onitsha remained a strategic, dynamic and regenerative melting pot of peoples and cultures with an aggressive commercial inclination, as well as an eye for the innovative and progressive, and determinedly sought the missionaries and trading posts.[14] By 1930 it boasted a highly reputed grammar school, a number of elementary schools, a prominent bookshop, as well as "one great church with a regular congregation of 1000 Ibo Christians".[15] Its most important feature, though, besides the Niger, was its market, the "biggest

and most spectacular market in the whole world".[16] Egonu recalls it with nostalgia:

> If one mentions the activities in this area without the mention of the Onitsha market, the narrative would be incomplete. The market was close to the river and the space the market occupied was large. It was regarded as the largest market of its kind in the whole Africa. The term 'market' may sometimes give an impression of where limited and odd things are sold. Onitsha market was unique, because it was like a town of its own. There were areas for textiles, hardware, poultry, butchers' slaughter houses and meatshops, sale of fish along the river near the market, ready-made clothing outfits, some being made on the spot, especially by men sewing away on their sewing machines. The men mostly produced shirts, jackets, shorts, and trousers. There was an area for various types of palm wine. Also there were places where meals were provided.[17]

As already noted, the city and the market drew peoples from all over the West African coast as well as from the North. A popular section of the quarter where it was located in Otu was the Hausa quarter on the banks of the Niger, so named because it was the quarter of migrants from northern Nigeria, the most dominant among them being the Hausa. They brought in produce from the savanna; onions, sheep, peas and rice, crops and items not produced in the southern rain forests. In addition, they brought their religion and cultures with them, succeeding where the great Jihads of the previous century had failed. There were all the riverine peoples of the lower Niger sailing up the river in their boats to trade their produce and to settle. There were the funny looking evangelists and civil servants from Freetown who ran the schools and mission establishments and showed off their European apparel and shiny bicycles. There were the white administrators and missionaries who, when they arrived, fed tales of miracles and otherworldly happenings. And there were the owners of the land, arrogant and fiercely material, with their elaborate and intractable royalty.

A maze of colours, peoples, habits, temperaments, Onitsha was not only

bizarre and eccentric, it also made perfect home for the bizarre and the exceptional; street performers, frauds, stray Europeans seeking the end of the world, among them the memorable Stuart Young, "scholar, mystic, trader, single-handed fighter against the new European monopolistic cartels,"[18] as well as lover of the legendary mermaid of the river who lavished wealth on him and forbade him romantic relationship with mortals. Young was nick-named Odoziaku - keeper of wealth, accepted by the people as one of them, and would appear, half a century later, as one of the 'Heroes and Heroines of Onitsha'.[19] Achebe recalls another prominent figure in Onitsha in the 1930s, a half-demented minstrel named Okoli Ukpor:

> If you went to Onitsha in those days and did not run into Okoli your visit was somehow incomplete. He played for money on his flute, whistling and blowing his instrument alternately: "Man and woman, whoever holds money, let him bring." Occasionally, he would raise an additional half-penny by blowing each nostril into the open drain - in time with his beat. Rumour had it that Okoli was as sober as the next man, that he had two wives and a barn full of yams in his hinterland home, and only came to Onitsha during the slack moments in the farm to raise quick cash from amused charity by pretending to be light-headed.[20]

There were magicians, acrobats, quack technicians and inventors of myriad products and gadgets, pedlars of Eastern elixirs and aphrodisiacs rolled into one, prophets and fortune-tellers. And the centre of everything was the market and the immigrant quarter of Otu where Egonu was born.

Alongside the whirling eccentricities of an emergent modernisation were the particularly sophisticated traditions of the Onitsha, held tightly in place by the King, his royal chiefs, and an elaborate set-up of age-grades, societies, title-holders and priests. Each enactment of the rituals of the kingdom, the outing of an ancestral spirit, a regatta on the river to celebrate the queen of the seas, was a spectacle without equal. Such was the richness and colourfulness of Onitsha as Egonu knew

it, a patterned world of eccentricities and brilliant colours which he would draw upon later in life.

Egonu began his schooling at St. Joseph's Infant School, built on the property his grandfather had provided the missionaries. With his parents' marriage broken, his father away on his job, he was a lonely and withdrawn child for whom school was a world of warmth and relief.[21]

The infant school, as he remembers it, was more of a fair, with hordes of children who came more for the fun than anything else. It was a good environment for a child who had already begun to take to solitude, and gave him the opportunity to have the company of people his own age. By his accounts, this period comes across as perhaps the happiest in his whole childhood and youth.

After three years in the infant school, Egonu enrolled in the Holy Trinity Elementary School, a catholic mission school where the Head teacher , Mr Odogwu, was a friend of his family and relative of the sculptor and painter Ben Enwonwu. In some ways Holy Trinity was also fun for as long as it took him away from the restrictions of his grandmother and aunts. The environment was strict, though, and the activities hardly memorable. Here local teachers eager to impress white inspectors and clergy who keenly policed the schools, as well as emphasise their authority, brought down the whole weight of their high- handedness on the children. Corporal punishment was the ruling order, and it was not rare for a teacher to push the limits beyond the acceptable. It was in Onitsha at the turn of the century that a Sierra

Leonian school teacher flogged his housemaid to death with the aid of other school children because the little girl took food without permission.[22] In his own days Egonu recalls cane-wielding teachers keeping guard to rake in and trash late-comers and truants.

His happiest recollections from this period are about the festivities of Empire Day, the colonial celebration of Empire when all the schools in the region gathered at the government headquarters and the colonial administrator took their salute of allegiance to the British Empire. The fun was more in the sporting events, the colourful displays, the performing bands from the schools and the colonial paramilitary, and the cultural dances and enactments, than in the white-clad figure of the white man.

> It used to be a grand thing indeed. Naturally, the whole thing had a more or less propaganda purpose because what happened was, there used to be competition between the catholics and the protestants. Competition for shields ...First of all, in the morning, there would be a march past. The local Resident would take the salute with the Union Jack. Then, all the children would appear with their paper hats and so forth. First of all the infants. Then the Holy Trinity School, the St. Mary's School, the Protestants... There would be a brass band. Big do, yes. In the afternoon, the sports would start.[23]

The Empire Day, despite the drudgery of the march past the Resident Officer, was always an event to look forward to since it recreated the esotericism of an Onitsha market day with the added eccentricities of the Europeans in their all-white attire and helmets.

Egonu's favourite class at Holy Trinity was Nature study where he excelled for, by now, he had already begun to show a unique artistic talent. Before infant school, his creative inclinations was emerging slowly and painfully. Without the close attention of a direct mother or even of his father whom he recalls never

spending much time with, his creativity was not only untended but also regarded rather suspiciously by his relations. In his moments of loneliness, he occupied himself by leafing through the illustrated pages of his father's fashion and furniture catalogues, and soon, he was reproducing some of the illustrations. At his age this was not merely precocious to those around him, but ominous. On one occasion, while staying at an aunt's, he drew a human figure which astonished her in its accuracy. She took him to see a diviner who would find out what evil spirit he was possessed of, and quite expectedly, the diviner confirmed he was a spirit child. "He kept knocking on my head, knocking," Egonu recalls, and the trauma of this experience was to remain with him for a long period during which he began to believe it was wrong to draw and indeed that he was an abnormal child. After the incident it took him a while to find the courage to return to drawing.[24] When he learnt of it, his father was cross with the aunt in question and encouraged him to go ahead with his explorations. Nature Study at Holy Trinity gave him the opportunity to draw again and to continue to improve on his skill.

In 1942, Henry Egonu introduced his boy to a young, local teacher and artist, John Okechukwu with whom he began to take art lessons.[25] Okechukwu had taught himself art and was teaching art in the Teacher Training College in Onitsha where his profile as an artist was already rising and his works were bought by the church. He had a childhood much like Egonu's, having lost his parents at an early age and grown up in the care of an aunt. On his own he developed a rich skill in draughtsmanship as well as carving in the traditional canon. His ceramic pieces were sent over to Britain to be glazed, and some of his most accomplished works included a Crucifix for the chapel of the Catholic Church in the city. He is also believed to

have designed the Bishop's house at Holy Trinity Onitsha.[26]

An artist of Okechukwu's reputation seemed the right master for the young Egonu. Not only was he accessible, his youth and confidence showed in his unique teaching methods. He combined his instructions with conversations on the cultural wealth of the colonised people and how this was not inferior to that of the colonisers. He spoke about the art traditions of the Awka, their sculptors and blacksmiths, and about the Bini Empire. He talked about masks and masking as well as artistic practice and professionalism. He also taught his student the basics of visual literacy and draughtsmanship, and beyond the object, to think and explore images in his mind. Egonu recalls:

> We'd go for a walk, a long walk and, he won't say anything to me more or less, sometimes for a long time ... from time to time we'd stop, looking at that and so forth. Later he would say, well, that he would like to see my impression of what we'd seen, what impressed me...so, it's not a question of my going back because I had to think of it, you see. I had to think of it.[27]

Okechukwu introduced him to watercolours, modelling in clay, and still-life study, and gave him lessons in observation. These provided him with a sound grounding which would be very useful in the future.

In addition to his lessons with the art teacher, he recalls being taken to masquerade outings where, especially with his developing awareness, he would spend the time on his father's shoulders attentively contemplating and analysing the different masks, telling the beautiful from the ugly, and trying to work out the formalistic peculiarities even in his child's mind.[28] At about the same time too, there was another positive influence on his determination to continue with art in the person of the young and enigmatic artist, Ben Enwonwu, then a pupil of the itinerant British art instructor Kenneth C. Murray. Enwonwu's obvious talent, his

flamboyant nature and his reputation as perhaps the brightest of the Murray pupils, stood him out in the city and made him an object of admiration. Egonu showed him his drawings and received advise and criticism. Enwonwu's dedication to a career in art, in a way, also fortified Egonu's growing inclinations.

In 1944 Egonu left Onitsha to join his father in Calabar. It was the elder Egonu's wish that his son should be trained under the renowned teacher Professor Eyo Ita who was then at the Methodist Hope Waddell Institute. Eyo Ita had made himself a name through his unique teaching style and his fierce nationalism which reflected in his dedication to devising and using self-dependent technology. Obviously, Henry Egonu discussed Eyo Ita's uniqueness with his son who, though he could only have known little of the teacher then, still recalls his name with unqualified admiration.[29]

For a brief period Egonu was enrolled at the Institute where his talents were quickly noticed by the art teacher, Mr Ekanem. His time at Hope Waddell, however, was very brief, before he was moved to Sacred Heart College, Calabar. From the new school he entered for the first all-Nigeria junior art competition on the advise of his former art teacher, Ekanem, who was also the principal organiser and judge of the competition. When the results came out in 1945, he would already be far away from Calabar and Sacred Heart College, but his entry adjudged first place Kenneth Murray wrote to congratulate him. The letter has not been traced, the only reference to it being in another letter from his father after his departure from Calabar. This letter, however, as well as another from Ekanem congratulating him, and the winners certificate from the competition he lost in Finland in 1958.[30]

Not only did Henry Egonu provide his son with the best instruction and

material, and as right an environment for his talent as he could, he also pushed his work, proudly showing his watercolours and drawings around among his colleagues in government and in high society. Among those who were highly impressed by the boy's talent was a manager with the United African Company [UAC], Mr Gee, a generous young man from Little Snoring in Norfolk. Gee not only felt the burgeoning talent needed greater encouragement, he also felt the boy should be sent out of the country, as was the practice at the time, to an environment where he could realise his already obvious future. Like Henry Egonu whose generation had to go to Lagos or Freetown to get education comparable to that of the Europeans, the little Egonu, Gee felt, needed to go outside for better art training and to make his career. This, for him, meant England.

Modern art education in Nigeria was still in its embryonic stage at this time, despite the efforts of Onabolu, Murray, and the new crop of art teachers whom they had raised. A man of the standing of Henry Egonu, of course, would prefer to have his child brought up at the source of the new art rather than in an environment still in the making. On the other hand, given his fascination for and faith in Professor Eyo Ita and his philosophy of greater independence and self-reliance, he could also have felt slightly reluctant and unsure about sending his boy away, especially since he was still so young, particularly skinny and frail, and given to solitude.[31] However, the practice of sending little children to England all on their own to study, was already fairly popular among the nobility. Around the same time, the well-known transport mogul and produce trader, knight of the British Empire Sir Odumegwu Ojukwu, who would not only be known to Egonu but also hailed from only a few miles away from Onitsha, had sent off his own little son to England, at the age of

thirteen. The Ojukwu boy would later become the leader of the ill-fated Republic of Biafra. Ben Enwonwu, as Murray's top student, had already sailed for England. So that when Gee put the idea forward and in addition offered to have Uzo live with his family in Little Snoring till he was through school and ready for art college, it probably was not very difficult for the much travelled elder Egonu to concede and prepare his son for the trip to England.

Egonu arrived England late in 1945, while the war was coming to an end. He recalls that the Japanese were still at war and the allied presence in Britain was heavy. He was taken into the Gee family house in Little Snoring, and presently enrolled in a private school.

Although white presence was not entirely strange to him, having been in schools run by white missionaries back in Nigeria, being the only black person in the town was a fairly uncomfortable experience, especially at the beginning. However, being only a child, and one who in his lonely childhood had developed a certain independence and an ability to cope with his environment, the reserved Egonu saw the whole period as a passing phase which prepared him for a life he knew would be played out outside the little village of Snoring.

In the small private school run by the Macmillans in Little Snoring he learnt his subjects as well as some art. He recalls the art teacher knowing a lot less than her students. She would set up a still life for drawing and disappear, only to return the next week just to look at the drawings. But as this was not art school yet, and the

boys were not necessarily being prepared for careers in art, it did not matter how little attention was given to it. The Gees were particularly supportive and kind and would remain a presence in his life for long. In 1948 Egonu finished school and left Little Snoring for London the next year.

London in 1949 was a vast, blank town still convalescing from the disasters of war. A depression hung over it and its inhabitants with a certain ominousness. The fact that in the colonies subjects now heckled for independence with a new found brazenness and fury, especially after seeing through the myth of the Great Empire in the theatres of war, did not help matters. Also, immigrants flooded in from the colonies, as if to claim a right in the empire, and were gratefully received by a country that needed new slave labour to reconstruct the seat of empire.[32] London was thus a city of working men and travelling vendors sparsely dotted with Take Courage wine bars and bleak hostels, hardly a sight to excite the newcomer.

Also, as immigrants trouped in from the Indian subcontinent and the Caribbean, white racist resentment gradually became intense. Some jobs were few and hard to come by, and the new flood of hands further worsened the situation especially as the immigrants were more willing to work at anything no matter how odd and hard. There already was a feeling of swamping and signs barring dogs and blacks were rather common sight on the doors of residencies and in public places. This in a way forced immigrants to bond together in pockets and ghettos soon sprouted. In some areas people of colour could not hope to find accommodation or jobs, or even move freely. Such was the London the young Egonu met in 1949. It was the same year that the flambouyant Francis Newton Souza arrived England from Goa, and settled into poverty.[33]

In art, although a lively practice thrived under the state- sponsored war artists scheme, Cyril Conolly, in his last editorial in the *Horizon* summed up the spirit of the times thus: "from now on an artist will be judged by the resonance of his solitude and the quality of his despair." It was under this atmosphere of angst and despondence in European art, captured in Bacon's woolly and muffled disfigurations, that Egonu entered art college. The kitchen sink school was beginning and at the Borough Polytechnic young artists gathered around Bomberg. Closer to Camden Town where Egonu soon found lodging was the influential Euston Road Group and perhaps most importantly Victor Pasmore who also taught at the Camberwell school. Despite Conolly's projections, however, the two major figures of the war artists scheme, Moore and Nash still held stylistic sway over London. The war situation had required a starkness which drove abstraction into the background, signified as Simon Wilson has observed in the "geographical and artistic" isolation of the Hepworth - Nicholson group and their self banishment to Cornwall.[34] The other central figure was Sutherland whose 1946 *Thorn Tree* paintings were triggered by a 1944 St. Mathew's Church commission for a painting of the crucifixion which in itself was a trope for the agony, desolation, and despondency of the war and the years after. There was also Bacon whose work was not particularly revolutionary and was very much influenced by Moore and Sutherland. Perhaps, the only significant departure from figurative art during the period was Pasmore's controversial switch to pure abstraction in 1948 after his move to Blackheath.

This was the London Egonu arrived. In January 1949, he registered in the departments of Fine Arts and Typography at the Camberwell College of Arts and Crafts. The decision to go to Camberwell was conditioned by his father who wanted

for him to study not only art but something else which could assure him a job when he eventually returned to Nigeria, as was their plan. The 1940s were no time to hope for a well-paid job in Nigeria with only a certificate in art, the only openings being in school teaching.[35] The elder Egonu would have deemed his boy worthy of a more lucrative job with greater security than teaching could guarantee, if not in the civil service something he could do on his own. Could his concern also have been informed by something about his own life and health which was not revealed to his son, since he would die shortly, and perhaps needed an assurance that in his absence, his children and especially his first son, would be able to fend for themselves. His friends suggested printing in addition to art, and Camberwell was not only the place to find printing and art together, but where his friends had the right connections to make the special arrangement possible.

Besides, Camberwell had a reputation as one of the finest art colleges in Europe with its Florentine, neo-classicist orientation under L. J. Daniels. Under Gilbert Spencer who taught painting and drawing, life drawing was held with great emphasis, and so was the study of the old masters. The printing department was under W. J Wright and here, Egonu studied subjects including typography. Despite the college's credits, the Camberwell years were not particularly inspired, though Egonu worked at his studies and art with considerable diligence, both to please his father who kept a watch through his friends and the principal, and because he grew to see sense in the arrangement.

He commuted from Camden Town to Southwark, made very few friends, and only a few teachers made impressions strong enough on him to remember them. Among these was Spencer who, like his brother Stanley, would later become a

Royal Academician. Daniels paid particular attention to his work and he found the relationship encouraging and useful.

In Camden Town he lived not far from the West Africa Students Union, but where he no longer remembers, the area having been long replaced by council and business offices. The Union was particularly helpful in keeping him in touch not only with other African students but also with the general air of the period, the excitement of impending independence and all its prospects. The Union was where to read newspapers and get news from home, engage in long discussions about the times, avoid the chill and occasional boredom of London, and generally feel at home. His accent, which had been anglicised during his period in Norfolk, reverted to a marked Nigerian slant which he has maintained. This shift in accent is most important for not only did it signify a conscious identification with his origins and kin, it also marked a the beginning of a process of rejecting and ejecting the alien element, and subvertion of the alienation he had known for a while. It was invariably the signal for a mental and and political recovery, as well as a redefinition of the individual space. Although Egonu's works during this period remained indistinguishable and not unique in any particulars, a mental process was already in place which would not only shield his art from the fads of the day, eventually, but lead slowly yet directly to the definition of a personal aesthetic informed by his origins.

Egonu graduated from Camberwell in October 1951[36] with qualifications in

Printing as his major and Painting from the Art Department, and a distinct painting style more affined to the kitchen sink school with which he probably would be stylistically identified had he been white, with its rough, neo-realist-cross-expressionist domestic proletarianism and fussy paintwork. His testimonial, reissued and signed by Wright in 1962 after he apparently lost the original with other documents in Finland in 1958, shows no indication that he was an exceptional student at Camberwell but remarks that he was "hard-working and made satisfactory progress in his studies." He himself has remarked that although he worked hard at his studies, his mind was in fact "elsewhere".[37] The outside was where to prove himself. The chances of a young, black art graduate in 1951 were as lean as they are today, and it is no surprise if he was not part of any of the "Looking Forward" exhibitions of new British art held between 1952 and 1956 at the Whitechapel and promoted by the critic John Berger, though such young artists as John Bratby, Jack Smith and Derrick Greaves, all arguably his contemporaries, were represented.

It was during this period that he was taken to meet the sculptor Epstein, a meeting which recalls Epstein's own meeting with Brancusi in his Paris studio in 1912 in its tremendous impact on him, and from which he learnt a lot that would be meaningful in his career as a black artist in Britain. He had gone to see a friend and there met an engineer who had equally come to see his friend. The engineer, who was also interested in art, happened to have made an appointment with Epstein for the following week, and invited the young artists to come with him. The elderly master who was then in his last days, though he was dutifully acknowledged in official circles, had already faded from the scene and the centre of discourse,

overtaken by the rise of the younger but most importantly, 'truly' British sculptors Moore, Hepworth and Butler. Egonu recalls the meeting in Epstein's studio:

> Epstein asked me during conversation what my intention was, whether I will be going back home or staying and working here. Well, naturally I said that, of course my intention was to go back, but one never knows; I might stay here. I still remember what he said to me. Because he was a Jew. He said to me, well, that if it was in my thinking to stay in Europe, that I mustn't forget that it won't be enough just to be as capable as a local artist. That's one. The other is that you just get as far, and you find it difficult to go further because there'll be greater obstacles. That was his word. I still remember.[38]

For young white artists, the story was fairly different. Frank Auerbach, though he was not originally British, was also beginning his career around this time having just graduated from under Bomberg at Borough. While young artists like Auerbach were promoted in shows and given all the publicity and thus constructed into the vanguard of a new phase in modern art, black artists like Egonu were condemned to walk the streets of London with their canvases and portfolios and knock endlessly and futilely on gallery doors looking for a chance.[39] During this period Egonu lived on occasional sales of watercolours and drawings while sizing up the situation and his chances. Unfortunately, there is little record of the period either in the artist's possession or elsewhere to give us a more detailed idea of his career.

In 1953 Egonu moved to Paris where he lived for a year before returning to London. During his period in Paris he spent his time in the museums and galleries looking at collections of African art especially in the Musee de l'Homme, and at the old masters. His particular interest was in the Flemish School, Carravaggio, and the post-impresionsists. He did watercolours which he sold to live. On the streets of Paris he had made friends with a Ghanaian engineering student who knew a few buyers and introduced him and his work to them. Unfortunately, it has not been

possible to trace the Paris watercolours.

Egonu returned to Paris for another six month stay. In 1954 his father died in Nigeria, leaving him to support himself. It was apparent that he was beginning to contemplate the idea of staying on in Europe and gradually working his way up. His immediate excuses for not returning hastily were his anxiety over splitting his time between art and a job, which he feared he would have to do if he returned to Nigeria. Although he was interested in teaching art should he return to Nigeria, his information then was that there were no openings in art teaching. It is likely too that his enthusiasm was dampened by thoughts of missing the few fascinations of Europe which he was beginning to discover. He needed the resources which the numerous museums and galleries in Britain and Europe offered,[40] and he was content with discovering African art through these museums. He also needed the company of a community of young artists since art was his sole interest, and this, in his thinking, would be unavailable in Nigeria.

Though life was rough and treacherous especially for a young black artist, he felt more secure professionally staying a bit longer in Europe, at least till he was fairly established. He feared circumstances at home might force him to become a "Sunday only" painter and thus harm his development as an artist.[41] He found the competitive atmosphere in Europe healthy for an artist at the beginning of his career, especially since, as an African artist he required in his words "three times more hard work" even as this was no guarantee for success.[42] Ben Enwonwu, whose career he seemed to follow closely, had himself stayed back in England to practice awhile, earning and executing important commissions and building up his image with the art establishment. It was indeed his well-established profile in Europe that earned

him high government position upon return to Nigeria.

Also, with the death of his father Egonu's strongest tie with home was somehow severed. Although he was in touch with his mother, he had hardly known her. It is also possible that he was terrified of the responsibilities of an eldest son in the absence of a father, and needed a sense of security and a befitting status and means before he would consider returning.

His father's death may have occasioned his return to London in 1954. He continued to work in his Camberwell style, selling occasional drawings and watercolours and moving from gallery to gallery to deposit his work for sale. The termination of financial support from Nigeria meant he had to strive harder to survive, and his polished carriage and strict personality, while helping him with professional discipline, also meant he could not take the freedoms which a more bohemian, "artist" life-style provided. Hardly any work has been traced from this period, but his work from the second half of the decade suggest that he worked on cheap, low quality paper and lived quite lean.

Sometime in 1954, though, an incident took place which not only improved his means considerably for sometime but also started him out on a more solid professional ground. This was his meeting with Mr Bah, a meeting he has described as marking the beginning of his "journey" as an artist.[43] He had gone out sketching one afternoon, and on his return was walking along Charing Cross Road when it began to rain on him and on the portfolio under his arm. A car drove past him and drew up in front, and from the car the driver beckoned him and offered him a ride. He turned out to be a well-known business man, a club owner and greyhound-racer whose dog, Mr Bah's Choice, was, according to Egonu, very popular in dog-racing

circles across Britain. Mr Bah, a Gambian, quickly took to the young artist, and what began as a ride developed into a deep friendship and patronage running for the next three years.

Although Bah was not very well educated, he was all the same fascinated by the art and professional determination of his young friend, and in the years that they were close commissioned paintings and drawings from him, introduced him to his friends, helped organise little hangings of his works in libraries and other little venues, and found him clients.[44] Egonu produced watercolour and gouache landscapes and portraits, spending time also on the improvement of his craft. For him Bah became more than a patron and played the role of the father he only knew closely for so briefly and had lost finally through death.

During this period he earned enough for his upkeep as well as more trips on the continent. He hung out with other struggling young artists both black and white, and they would move from one artist's little room to another's, or cramp up in someone's studio, that is if he had a studio of his own. Through him Bah also helped the others, getting his friends to buy their work and help them survive.

In 1958 Egonu travelled for two months in Finland, visiting museums and galleries in Helsinki, Turku and Tampere. He did little watercolours and landscape sketches on the trip, and while in Tampere he was a sensation, being the first black person most people in the city ever saw. It was during this trip that he lost the little suitcase with his documents and treasured correspondences. The same year he also visited Sweden and Denmark. Upon return he moved to West Hampstead. Although life was still difficult, he was finally beginning to settle down as a professional.

In 1959, however, he registered as an evening student at St. Martin's School

of Art to study life drawing.[45] His trips in Europe and his fascination for the old masters had, in a way, shown up his weakness in drawing. His training at Camberwell appeared inadequate, and since he could not afford a paid model for his drawing practice, he decided to join the college and that way have access to one. Apparently his career was not going the way his father had divined when he insisted that he study Typography. Bookbinding and typesetting never succeeded in capturing his interest, and on settling down finally to a full professional career as a painter he saw the need to beef up his skill.

Earlier, he had applied to the Nigerian Government for financial aid for further study.[46] He had not completely lost his ambition to eventually return to Nigeria, especially with the excitement of impending independence. He had developed a fascination for printmaking and its enormous possibilities, and he felt it would be of particular interest in a developing country. So he would study printmaking and return to teach same in Nigeria. But when he applied for a scholarship he received a polite acknowledgement and, much later, an apology. His application was turned down. He was very disillusioned especially as he tried again and again without better luck. It was this early that he began to feel sceptical about the new, independent dispensation and its prospects.

For this and other reasons he decided to stay back in Europe. He studied evening for two years at St. Martins, and because he did not have the finance to take a full specialist course, he made do with the life study classes and quit. Works surviving from this period, though they show no exceptional departures, reveal a growing dissatisfaction and agitation, perhaps a disillusionment not only in his private life but stylistic too. Living remained hard and he occasionally had to recycle

supports to keep painting. In one case in he immersed over thirty canvases in the bath and had his girlfriend scrub off the paint so he could dry and re-use them.[47]

1960 signified the artist's second break, bringing him his first major public commissions and press attention. In September, as part of the setting up of diplomatic structures for the new Nigerian nation, the brewing firm of Whitbread & Company wanted a painting for the Nigeria House in London. Egonu met with the advertising company, A. N. Holden Ltd. who were acting on behalf of Whitbread, and they agreed to look at sketches for a painting on Nigerian life. He handed in sketches and proposals for a painting of a market scene, and in October Whitbread gave the go-ahead for the painting at a fee of 70 guineas. By the end of the year the painting was ready and a few months later, was accepted by Whitbread for installation at the Nigeria House.[48]

The same year Egonu approached Rev. Patrick Brock of St. Martin-in-the-Fields in West London to show his works in the church. In November Rev. Brock wrote to offer him space in the undercroft for a period of five or six weeks starting October 9, 1961, during which he could exhibit but on a number of conditions. One was that since the church had no history of exhibitions he would be unable to display prices on the works or in the exhibition catalogue. The other was that he would be required to pay some unspecified charge for the "stewarding" of the exhibition which would be provided by the church. He would also be responsible for the security of the works.[49]

The artist was also approached by a group of Ghanaians in London to do a portrait of Kwame Nkrumah. He did numerous sketches, working in the heroic neo-classical tradition. Nkrumah was portrayed as the benevolent philosopher king,

a Christ figure extending his a hand of blessing over his flock. The concept may have been informed by the politician's cult name, Osagyefo, the Great Teacher, and the infectious fervour he inspired in his admirers among whom was the artist. When Nkrumah visited London in 1961 Egonu had audience with him and was allowed to do life sketches for the painting. In a way he was beginning to relive the career of his childhood idol Enwonwu who had regular audience with the Queen while he worked on her statue in 1958. When a few years later Susan, Duchess of St. Albans visited Egonu in his studio at Goldhurst Terrace, he would speak of the visit with an enthusiasm which alludes to and indirectly compared it to the Queen's visits to Enwonwu's studio.

Egonu's portrait of Nkrumah, however, was eventually rejected by his clients. A heated contention had erupted among the group over the appropriateness of the image and concept and the artist, disillusioned by the relative aesthetic half-wittedness of most people in the group, decided to keep the painting which remains in his collection.

He got on with other things, seeking buyers for his works, approaching galleries to show him. In 1962 he showed in the Pan African Council exhibition in London. The next year he joined the newly formed Free Painters and Sculptors group and his work was shown with the group at the FBA gallery. He also showed in the winter salon of the Royal Institute Galleries. His dissatisfaction with his work which began some years earlier persisted, coupled with a very deep nostalgia which had now moved from real life to his creative work. His growing stature and gradual acceptance in Europe contrasted with the lingering feeling of rejection by his home country which the failed applications of 1959 had stirred. It also sharpened his

dilemma over return to Nigeria. The yearning for physical return now transformed into an imaginative one producing series of paintings on African themes and subjects: portraits of Africans, landscapes, anecdotal compositions drawing from childhood memories, and genre.

The patriotic pride of national self-determination sustained a private vow of self-determination as identification with the cultural nationalism at home drove the artist steadily towards a stylistic framework which signified all these. Though his contacts with home were not particularly strong and numerous, he read news reports and followed events and thus remained part of both the euphoria, if guardedly so, and the concrete movement towards political and cultural redefinition. 1962 to 1965 marked what, in his art, he has described as "the Bridge",[50] the moment of final transition from nostalgia and mere gestural identification with home to maturation and realistic self discovery.

In September 1964 Egonu was given his first major one man show at the Woodstock Gallery in London. The response was mild but significant. Art critics and journalists registered minor reservations with the naivety of the mostly genre paintings and the handling of paint, but all were united in observing a talent to watch. It should be observed though that "naivety" and "crudity" were not in short supply in the art of the period, in Hockney or Bratby, but in an 'outsider' artist it was seen as a shortcoming and not a mark of sophistication or subversion. In a way, though, Egonu seemed to have arrived since finding venues for solo shows was not particularly easy for any black artist in Britain at the time. The 1964 Woodstock show came at the head of a wave of pluralist receptivity, ambiguous as it was short-lived, that would sweep through Europe in the wake of the American hijack of European

artspace and discourse. Together with a growing broad interest in outsider literatures, the art establishment was willing to admit anything but more American vulgarism. There was also curiosity over the peoples of the newly liberated colonies, with new openings seeking to present them outside of the colonial context. The nature and context of presentation of work from these cultures was slightly changing from that of colonial trophies to evidence of living cultures.[51]

In a way, also, the new attitude to other cultures was the liberal and fabian-socialist response to the growing political intolerance towards settlers. The somewhat unexpected collapse of the Empire coinciding with the influx of peoples from the colonies, for as long as it was no longer seen in positive economic light, aroused a growing feeling of stern resentment in the "mother-country". This culminated in the 1962 Commonwealth Immigration Law, followed up with an even more stringent other in 1965. Improved tolerance in sections of the arts run by young liberals not only signified their own defiance of the establishment but created a semblance of receptivity which carried till the end of the decade before it was reversed. This atmosphere somehow empowered outsider artists to utilise the few spaces available to them and to initiate collaborations with the liberal fringes of the art establishment.[52]

While the Whitechapel, bastion of the establishment, ran its series of annual *New Generation* exhibitions between 1964 and 1966, predictably excluding artists of colour, intercultural fringe and *avant garde* groups like Signals not only initiated and ran their own independent discourse but also organised their own shows.[53] Settler art movements like the Indian Painters Movement and later, the Caribbean Artists Movement CAM sprang up alongside community and political organisations.

Although Egonu operated largely outside these developments - he later flirted with CAM and was a founding member of an African parallel - his career gained through them, especially from 1964.

With the Woodstock solo underway and attracting considerable attention, the artist was invited by Milton Grundy, chairman of the Gemini Trust in London to participate in the Trust's first sponsored exhibition at the Woodstock Gallery in 1965.[54] The Trust, according to a review of by Barbara Wright in The *Arts Review*, was "dedicated to showing new artists who are not necessarily 'fashionable and saleable'".[55] His entries in exhibition again attracted considerable attention for their uniqueness and the evidence of an individual, "unfamiliar" style. The illustrator Andrew Dodd did a drawing of him which appeared alongside an article in the *Eastern Daily Press* of Norwich,[56] and introduced him to the newly opened Africa Centre on King Street.[57]

He also caught the eyes of the Caribbean sculptor Ronald Moody, the grand old man of Black artists in Britain who came to Europe in 1923. Moody did a lengthy article on Egonu's work in the *Magnet* which not only studied him in far greater detail than anyone else before, and with remarkable insight, but also reveals Moody's versatility.[58] Moody was moved by Egonu's use of colour which he described as "having the exuberance of a divination vessel or a chief's stool from Yoruba". This he related to the painter's experiences as a man of colour in Europe, observing he ability not to allow them to "warp his warm and vital quality." A strong and intimate friendship had begun which would last till Moody's death twenty years later and would involve very close creative collaboration.

The same year Egonu was represented in an exhibition of "Contemporary

Nigerian art and crafts" in the Royal Festival Hall, alongside sculptors from McEwen's Rhodesia workshop. The exhibitions were part of the 1965 Commonwealth Festival. Although Egonu received good press, and audience with important political personages, the exhibition was ill-conceived and poorly presented. His work also featured in the Contemporary African Art exhibition curated by Dennis Duerden for the National Museum of Wales in Cardiff.

Egonu's second one-man exhibition opened in Brighton the same year, and he was tipped to appear in the First World Festival of Negro Arts in Dakar, Senegal in April the next year. News of his participation was carried in the press in Britain and Nigeria. He did take part in the exhibition together with such other Black artists from Britain as Ronald Moody, Frank Bowling, and Aubrey Williams who showed his "Arawak". Egonu exhibited "King Fighting Three Battles", already shown in the Royal Festival Hall show.[59]

He continued to appoach galleries and venues to show his work. One of those was the Upper Grosvenor Gallery, run by Susan, Duchess of St. Alban who sought a visit to the artist's studio "with the idea of an exhibition" in the gallery.[60] She was taken by the artist's work and in the summer of 1966, he showed in the Gallery's summer exhibition alongside Mervyn Peake, James Fitton and Norman Gilbert, among many others.[61] In September his third one man show opened with the gallery, commissioned by the Mr Bottomley, British Minister for Overseas Development. Although some of the works in the exhibition were from 1963, the majority of the works were drawn from what he called the *Protection Series*, a series of works dealing with the theme of physical and spiritual insecurity. In a way the exhibition was as apocalyptic as *Path of Thunder*, the highly apocalyptic poem his countryman and

contemporary Christopher Okigbo was working on at the same time in Nigeria and which he would not finish before he was felled the following year in the Nigeria-Biafra war.

The years since 1963 had been marked by growing violence and anxiety in Nigeria, overshadowing the glee of independence and casting a blanket of despair over many, especially those living outside. As Egonu worked on his *Protection series*, life at home was becoming more and more insecure as violence and political intolerance spread through the country. In January 1966 the political tension came to a head when a group of young military officers, led by the visionary and revolutionary Kaduna Nzeogwu, violently overthrew the elected government, resulting in the death of some of the country's leaders. Though the putsch, somehow inspired by Nasser's in Egypt, was received with relief and widespread approval among many sections of the populace, it failed to install its own men in leadershhip, and the government that took over power lacked the strength to restore order quickly. A number of hasty and ill-advised policy moves at the centre, rather than reassure the population, exacerbated the tension and ill-feelings between different sections leading to a counter-coup and a secession bid by the larger Northern section of the country which, incidentally, lost more men in the January putsch. Peoples in the North felt the earlier coup had been aimed at them, substantiating their position by the fact that the greater number of participants were Igbo from the East. What followed was a series of genocidal attacks on the Igbo population that began in the North and soon spread throughout the West as well. News of the slaughters reached Egonu, an Igbo, in London. However, the Protection series worked on a grand, universal level, as we shall see later in study, and this magnified their power of

apocalypse.

Egonu's last exhibition in 1966 was with the Hampstead Artists Council which he had joined. He was however approached by H. B. Frankel, secretary of the Leicester University Arts Festival who met him at the Africa Centre in Covent Garden, to show during the festival and to give a talk on his work.[62] His fourth solo exhibition did hold in Leicester in 1967, but that would be his only show that year. Events at home had taken a bleak turn with the mass exodus of Igbo people from all parts of Nigeria back to their homeland in the East, and their subsequent declaration of self-determination under the Republic of Biafra. Suddenly, the artist's nationality had changed, and so at an enormous human cost.

The agonising confusion is evident in the biographical data carried in the catalogue of his next solo exhibition in 1968 where he was listed as having been born in "Onitsha, Biafra, Eastern Nigeria."[63] In September 1967 the Duchess directed that contracts be sent to the artist for a second one man show with the Upper Grosvenor Galleries from July to August, 1968. The exhibition was equally conceived as a charity event to raise money for the war affected in Biafra. In the winter of 1967 the artist had requested that some of the proceeds from the sale of his works be channelled to this purpose by the Gallery, mentioning ten paintings to be shown in a charity exhibit. As the conflict in between Nigeria and Biafra escalated and the death tolls in Biafra began to rise, charities began to spring up around the world to help where governments chose to remain uninvolved. Some of the charities were registered, others were not. A letter from the Dutchess in October 1967 shows that the charity to which Egonu was donating ten paintings was one such unregistered effort, and the gallery's policy forbade their involvement. The 1968 exhibition was

therefore carefully planned to involve registered charities and recognised personalities in the aid campaign for Biafra, especially the church. A short appeal written by the Rev. Robert Gibson, Dean-elect of Port Harcourt and member of the Christian Council Project, was carried in the catalogue, and the critic Laurence Bradshaw noted that not only was Egonu making his contribution to the cause of alleviating the sufferings at home, he was equally making a universal protest as "death walks abroad".[64] The title of the exhibition itself underlined the artist's non-partisan, non- sectarian response to the tragedy at home. The exhibition was opened on July 16 by Lord Soper of the All Hallows Biafra Refugees Fund, and received good press. Dennis Duerden, writing for the *Arts Review*, observed that it was a surprise that with the events at home, Egonu could find the fortitude to paint at all.[65] Duerden commended the artist's ability to evoke powerful moods with his use of colour which he found more effective than the explicit allegories which the artist had indulged in to put across his feelings about the tragedy at home. The *Daily Mirror* commented that, telling from the works, "Egonu feels possibly more deeply than most about the situation."[66]

While Egonu made his contributions to the war effort, other contemporaries at home and abroad, young artists and intellectuals, some of them of international repute, headed the campaigns for the survival of Biafra. One of these was Uche Okeke who had read about Egonu especially after he took part in the 1966 Festival in Dakar in which he was also represented. When the war broke out Okeke was part of the exodus of the Igbo from other parts of Nigeria. He soon joined the war effort and headed the visual arts section of the Biafran Refugees Affairs Committee in Aba and Umuahia. In this position he put together an exhibition of Biafran art which he

took on tour to Germany, and while in Germany he got in touch with Egonu. A friendship ensued which would last for long after the tragedies of war. Back in Biafra the new nation's most well known writer Chinua Achebe undertook to present its plight to the international community in lectures and readings around the world. On the other hand Nigeria's most well known writer Wole Soyinka, later winner of the Nobel Prize for Literature, was in jail over his sympathies with Biafra. The tragedy thus united the young artists even as it physically severed them from one another.

From London Egonu followed events closely as the world press scavenged them for television. His wife collected newspaper clippings. Life hung literally on the next bit of news from behind the lines where the artist's own family lived in uncertainty with two of his brothers in the Biafran army[67].

Egonu held a second solo show in 1968, this time at the Commonwealth Institute Gallery in Edinburgh. He was also able to take part in a number of group shows, including one in support of Czechoslovakia after the Soviet occupation. The "Artists for Czechoslovakia" exhibition was held at the Camden Arts Centre Galleries in London. He was represented in the "Contemporary African Art" exhibition at the Africa Centre and in the exhibition of "Artists of Eigth Commonwealth Countries" at the City Arts Gallery in Bristol. As a mark of his status he was successfully elected to the life fellowship of the Royal Society for the Arts, RSA.

In 1969, after taking part in a series of group shows including the well-received "Contemporary African Art" exhibition held this time at the Camden Arts Centre with the collaboration of *Studio International*, Egonu was approached by

Donald Bowen, curator of the Commonwealth Institute Gallery in London to show at the Stroud Festival the next year. Bowen had introduced his work to the art adviser of the Festival, Sir Oliver Heywood.[68] Heywood expressed willingness to meet with Egonu and see more of his work. Early in 1970 the Chairman of the Festival confirmed their invitation for Egonu to show at the festival, and in November of the same year, a solo exhibition of his works, described by the *Stroud News and Journal* as "the most exciting and impressive one-man show seen at the George Room in Stroud",[69] opened to a warm reception in Stroud.

In July George Bennet, senior producer with the Africa Service of the BBC and later administrator of the Africa Centre in London, invited Egonu to participate in the BBC Morning Show competition for artists from Africa and the Middle East, at least since, as he indicated to the artist, "the prizes are well worth having." Interestingly, first prize was £100 and, perhaps more appealingly, a solo show in Kenya. The judges were Bowen of the Commonwealth Institute, the critic and art historian Edward Lucie-Smith, and Dennis Duerden. The competition recorded 222 entries from 19 countries. Egonu entered one of his war paintings, 'Exodus', which quite predictably and easily won the first prize.

Although the local newspaper, the *Golders Green Gazette & North London Press* excitedly reported that "it was not until the judges had made their final choice of the best painting that it was discovered that the winner lived in London - in West Hampstead in fact," the judges were of course all familiar with the artist's work and both Duerden and Bowen had spoken highly of him previously. The prize, however, marked the beginning of a decade of international prizes and honours which would eventually include a bronze medal from "Les Arts en Europe 1971" shared with the

Italian artist Guerriro Aspertoni, the cup of the City of Caserta from the Concorso Internationale di Pittura in Napoli which organized a competition for the Italia 2000 Festival in 1971, and in 1972 a shared second prize in the *African Arts* competition organized by African Arts magazine and the University of California in Los Angeles. The prize was shared with the Morrocan artist Ahmed Louardini, and the London-based South African painter Louis Maqhubela.

As part of the first prize in the BBC Morning Show competition Egonu's work was shown in a solo exhibition in Nairobi, Kenya to excited press reception. The artist could not go to Kenya but the show which opened on January 20, 1971 in the Gallery Africa in Nairobi was commissioned by the Kenyan minister for Agriculture, Jeremiah Nyaga. In attendance also was the Nigerian High Commissioner in Kenya, His Excellency I. C. Olisaemeka who described the artist curiously as "one of the most promising artists in Nigeria". The willingness of the Nigerian government to accord him this recognition so quickly after the war could easily be read as an act in the spirit of political reconciliation which the government had vowed or, on the other hand, a recognition of the artist's non-partisan attitude to the war and his comment that although his winning entry in the competition was inspired by the cruelties of the war, "an artist's job is to observe, not to comment".[70] Or, perhaps, it was simply to lay claim to an artist of enormous international acclaim and put this to the purpose of rebuilding the country's image abroad. The gesture was even more politically convenient since the Nigerian consul in Nairobi was Igbo. The kenyan *Daily Nation* ran a biography of the artist in preview of the exhibition. There was also a preview in the city entertainment guide, *What's On in Nairobi*.[71]

Before the competition and all the hype that followed it Egonu had returned

to serious printmaking. In 1970 he took evening classes in etching, lythography and screenprinting at the Workingmen's College in Camden Town and he and Ronald Moody built their identical presses. The affinity between his oil painting and the possibilities of classical printmaking; flat colours, defined shapes, the preponderance of lines, made the stylistic transition natural, and the portfolio of prints that won him the bronze in the Counseil Europeen D'Art et Esthetique competition in 1971 were very close to his oil paintings.

In August 1971 Egonu finally married his friend for over ten years, the German portrait artist Hiltrud Streicher. Streicher had conducted the first detailed interview with the artist on his work in 1966 and they lived together for quite a while before the wedding in 1971. She had not only helped the artist with administration and establishing some sense of order in his work and dealings with buyers and collectors, she also kept house basically on her earnings as a private secretary especially while Egonu went through his period of relative obscurity. She had been most invaluable to him during the war years when he was perpetually on the verge of a breakdown from anxiety and bitterness. Soon after they got married, the couple moved to a house on 32 Coniston Gardens, South Kenton, and this was duly reported in the local press.[72]

The same year Egonu published a small portfolio of 5 lithographs illustrating an Igbo folk story, *Once Upon a Time in Ibo-Land*. The prints and story, described as an "original short story", were about one episode in the life of the Igbo trickster figure, the tortoise. The narration was plain and the language hardly exceptional, but it manifested the artist's literary interests. In May 1970 he took the idea to Heinemann the publishers who requested the manuscript and photographs of the prints. After

reading, Heinemann declined publication on the polite grounds of production costs. However, the editor of the African section at Heinemann, James Currey, in order to smooth out the effect of the rejection, offered to find the artist a cover illustration job.[73] In August 1971 Heinemann forwarded to him the manuscript of *Isiburu*, a novel by the Nigerian writer Elechi Amadi, for illustration. Thus began a period of serious engagement in book illustration and design that occupied the artist throughout the early seventies and provided needed finances for his upkeep and other work. During the period he designed and illustrated books for Oxford University Press, Thomas Nelson & Sons Ltd, Ginn & Co. Ltd in addition to Heinemann. It was *Once Upon a Time in Ibo-land* which eventually won him bronze at the Les Artes en Europe 1971 in Brussels.

In 1972 Egonu had a solo exhibition at the newly opened Agysimba Gallery in Berlin which recieved good press. The next year he was selected to serve on the U.K committee of the World Black Festival of Arts and Culture FESTAC due in Lagos in 1977. Originally the festival was planned for 1975, but due to political events in the country it would not hold till two years later. Between May and June 1973 he had a well-received solo show of paintings, prints and book illustrations at the Commonwealth Institute in London. Writing about the works in the *Arts Review*, Cottie Burland noted vaguely but revealingly that the artist "is of now and makes lasting beauty which pleases even before one enters the picture."[74] The sculptor Emmanuel Jegede coined the expression "the vision of Egonu" which in his words "travels deep into human emotional problems not only of his society but the entire world".[75] Although during this period Egonu was moving from the theme of the war years into the religious period in his work, the exhibition covered the war and

immediate post-war works.

The artist's new preoccupation from 1971, however, was with ritual and cosmological themes from the Igbo world. In a sense this differed from the nostalgia of the late fifties and early sixties by combining the sobriety of maturity, relief from the anxiety of the war years, and confidence brought by his now established artistic identity. The works no longer signified a search or a feeling of loss but a re-affirmation, a wisened interpretation of the artist's world. In an interview with Adeyeke Adeyemo mentioned in the journal, *African Arts*, he spoke of his wish for an "Ibo religious revival"[76] and although he did not ellaborate on the nature or meaning of this revival, it could be seen that the wish was more a projection of his settling persona in Europe than a realistic vision. It is interesting, though, that he thought of this cultural, religious revival in very closed group terms rather than in a vague, pan-continental form. In a sense, despite his vacillations over nation and identity in the sixties, he was settling for a precise group identity the edges of which must have been sharpened by the civil war. The war, afterall, had thrust the Igbo nation into the international spotlight, and the inscription of the Biafra nation in the Igbo group had transformed it finally into a nation, a political unit of visible form in a manner unprecedented in the people's history. Just as the anti-colonial struggle and the rise of nationalism had created a Yoruba nation out of a diversity of hitherto antagonistic groups, the events of the mid and late sixties and most especially the war, had cohered a particularly loose group and created a fiction of cultural unity. It was this unity that formed the base for Egonu's religious visions, the sub-textual political implications of which must not be lost sight of.

In 1974 he took part in the 2nd Norwegian Print Biennale in Frederikstad, on

the invitation of the Biennale president Herman Hebler. He also recorded a film with the Central Office of Information, one of several recorded interviews for the London Line and Focus on London television programmes, and one of which was shown on television in Nigeria the next year. Late in 1974 the he had another solo exhibition at the University of Lancaster where he also gave a talk on his work.[77]

In 1975 he was invited to serve on the panel of judges for U.K entries for FESTAC by the U.K committee.[78] Although he was part of the Black British contigent to the Festival, he also received an invitation from home the next year to be part of the Nigerian representation. The letter of invitation described him with characteristic official vagueness as "one of Nigeria's important artists",[79] recalling the description by the Nigerian diplomat in Nairobi five years earlier. In both cases the tone of the description betrayed a vague familiarity, a feeling that although the artist was known in his country, this was only by a handful of people, and official circles only knew him by reputation rather than through contact with his work.

Yet, not only was the invitation and recognition from home dear to him, he also looked forward with great excitement to the opportunity to visit Nigeria. The period was one of general excitement throughout the black world as artists, cultural practitioners and politicians prepared for the great get-together. The United Kingdom contingent pledged their determination to "make a major contribution to the festival and one which reflects the life-style and artistic activities of black people in the U.K".[80]

When the UNESCO in Paris called for entries for a poster competition for the region of Africa south of the Sahara in 1975, Egonu entered. However, the winning prize went to the Mauritian artist Houssain Sumodhee. Egonu was awarded a

participation prize of $50. But even more importantly, his work was noticed by the secretary of the International Association of Art, Marshall Malagola who later became a friend and confidant of the artist and was instrumental in consolidating his relations with the IAA and the Unesco of which it is a part.

In 1977 Egonu finally travelled to Nigeria for the FESTAC, his first return to Nigeria in 31 years. For him it was a great moment, like returning from exile. "When I arrived in Nigeria," he recalled in a conversation in 1990, "for the 2 days I was in Lagos, believe me, I don't know how to explain it. It felt like setting a bird free from a cage."[81] Home was a complete contrast to the years in Europe, the seclusion and exclusion from the mainstream of society, the cold both physical and human, the constant feeling of rejection and separation, the discrimination which he had known and borne throughout his years in Britain but had learnt to understand and ignore. His return was the fulfilment of a long-held dream, and his reception was a rehabilitation. However, this moment of glory was to last but for even shorter than he had planned. On the second day he went down with flu, a very rare ailment in tropical weather, and had to be flown back to Europe even before the festival got underway. And if he thought of returning soon, events and incidents in his life in the next few years would make the chances rather very remote. Such was his return story.

His next solo exhibition was not until 1979 when he put up a little show at the St. Paul's school in London. There is little evidence that the exhibition was widely received or publicised. That year, however, he was invited to participate in the 13th International Biennial of Graphic Art in Yugoslavia where he won the purchase prize. He took part in the first National Exhibition of Modern British Prints in Blackpool,

and his entry, 'Lone Eater', caught the attention of the art press.[82] He was also specially invited to participate in the 2nd Third World Biennale of Graphic Art in London and Baghdad, Iraq the next year. After the London show at the Iraqi Cultural Centre, the Iraqi government invited him along with other artists to witness the opening of the Biennale in Baghdad as well as give seminars and slide talks on their work.[83]

The planned trip turned out to resemble his near-aborted return to Nigeria in 1977. On September 22, 1980 the invitees gathered at the Iraqi Cultural Centre in London from where they would be transported to the airport, travel documents ready and arrangements concluded. While they were at the centre, the outbreak of hostilities was announced between Iraq and Iran. The trip was called off. The Baghdad Biennale did hold nevertheless, and Egonu's entry, 'Lone Eater' was was chosen for Honourable mention.

The decade had come to an end with Egonu's name firmly established in the art world. From the BBC Morning Show prize in 1970 to invitations to participate in the world's most prestigious graphic art events, he had worked his way to prominence. A 1976 letter from Rudolph Mayer, organizer of the Internationale Buchkunst-Ausstellung, Lipzig inviting him to participate in the show which is meant to "show which are the maeans in graphics and printing nowadays existing and how they can be employed with distinguished and various results by prominent artists" noted further that the show could not be representative enough should the organizers "rennounce to your giving a contribution."[84] As a printmaker he had, afterall, won some of the most esteemed prizes in cross-cultural, international competitions within and outside Europe. His reputation was supposedly established

on the scene of international contemporary art. While the Baghdad Biennale was on, Egonu was participating in another major invitational international exhibit, the First International Biennial Exhibition of Portrait Graphics and Drawing, Tuzla, Yugoslavia. The organisers of the exhibition to which Egonu entered his screenprint, 'Flute Player Resting' [Portrait], had described it as "aimed at showing the greatest creations in the genre of portrait graphics and drawing today."[85] In 1978 Egonu was invited by Kwak Duck Jun as one of "200 internationally well-known artists" to participate in *Now Drawing Is*, organised by the Japanese critic Yoshiaki Inui to show the state of the art of contemporary drawing, and the exhibit toured Japan after it was shown in August at the Imabashi Gallery in Osaka. The artist could now be said to be at the height of his career.

Incidentally, the end of the decade was not all glory and fun for him. Clearly the 1970s had been his printmaking decade, just as the 1960s were given almost completely to oil painting. And though he and Moody had built woodcut and etching presses, his preference was for etching, a medium whose appeal to him was profoundly influenced by his exposure to the etchings of Durer and Rembrandt.[86] For him the etchings of the two European masters were unasailable in their impressionable vigour and "the sensibility and simplicity of lines".[87] Etching, more than any other printmaking technique, yielded most easily and effectively to his own love for the simple statement, and gave him room to explore what he had described in 1966 as "the poetry of lines."[88] The possibility of direct drawing on the plate and of achieving the most interesting textures are the strengths of etching, and Egonu's drift towards love of textures and monochrome from the sixties, made this his perfect medium.

But etching has its hazards. Without the correct gear, the technique could indeed be fatal. Not only are acid baths, necessary in traditional etching, dangerous upon contact with the skin, the fumes which exude from oxidation in the etching process are equally dangerous both through inhalation and to the eyes. Apparently, Egonu was not sufficiently protected against the latter, and gradually through the seventies as he produced print after print for exhibitions and competitions, the fumes began to damage his eyes. By 1979 cataracts had developed in both of his eyes, and his sight took a plunge for the worse. Thus began his period of "painting in darkness"[89]

So severe was the failure of sight that the artist could no longer see his own work or even his palette of colours, and had to mix by memory. To get an idea of the arrangement of elements on a painting he would roll up a black tube and peer through this. Preliminary drawings on canvas would gradually fade away before he could apply colour. It was during this period of 'darkness' that he created some of his most colourful and memorable works; the celebrated and multiple prize-winning screenprints, his socio-philosophical series, *Stateless People*, and the cycle of nature studies, *The Four Seasons*. And it was in this state of difficulty very reminiscent of the athritic Renoir or the deaf Beethoven, not with the Euphoria of international recognition, that he moved from the seventies into a new decade. Ironically, the most hectic, most exciting decades of his career were equally over as he stepped into the eighties.

In March 1981 Egonu represented African on a jury for the Unesco Poster competition for the year. The arrangement had been made by his friend, Marshall Malagola, secretary of the International Association of Art in the Unesco. He visited

Paris for the assignment and his contributions are recorded in the minutes of the jury meeting in Paris on March 16, 1981. What is interesting is how the artist could have carried out this assignment with his failing sight. A portion of the minutes of the jury adds a bitter irony to the proceedings: "Mr Egonu [Nigeria] felt that ...since a calender performs twelve months of service, it must be worthy of a long look."[90] The irony is that at this moment, the artist could no longer sustain a long look at any work without it fading into greyness.[91]

He continued to work in 1981 and took part in a number of group exhibitions and international competitions including the International Biennale of Graphic Art in Yugoslavia, the Seoul International Print Biennale at the National Museum of Modern Art, Seoul, and the second National Exhibition of Modern British Prints, Blackpool. He produced sketches of ideas for paintings and did a few paintings, but the meaning of painting had changed for him. Not only did the personal significance of creative work deepen for him, he also found that working was not a luxury but a necessity for both his material and spiritual survival, and especially the latter, in the circumstances. Painting in this "period of darkness", he wrote later, "lifted [his] morals."[92]

In April and May 1982, Egonu's screenprints were shown in a group exhibition to mark the tenth anniversary of *Okike*, the literary journal and cultural foundation which Chinua Achebe founded in Nsukka, Nigeria. The exhibition featured the original works of artists of great reputation who had contributed illustrations to the journal in the past, among them Skunder Borghossian, Malagantana Valente, Nja Madoui, and Bruce Onobrakpeya. Although Egonu's works had not previously appeared in the journal, four of his recent colour screenprints were exhibited as a

celebration and homage. The *Okike* exhibition was put together by the journal's art editor, the poet and painter Obiora Udechukwu, a friend and great admirer of the artist who described him in the exhibition brochure as "the doyen of African artists in London and perhaps the finest African painter".[93]

In August a solo show of Egonu's drawings, prints and gouaches opened at the Bhownagree Gallery of the Commonwealth Institute, London to considerable notice. Featured were the four colour prints shown in Nigeria, eight other prints, seven drawings and eleven goauches including the studies for *The Four Seasons*. The works covered the period from 1974 to his most recent work and some of the drawings were studies for oil paintings. In a short review in the publication, *Funoon Arabiah* the critic George Whittet, former editor of *Studio International*, observed that the "elimination of detailed description raises Egonu's work to a level expression in two dimensions that is rarely met in contemporary European styles since the death of Paul Klee."[94] The exhibition ran till September.

1983 was upbeat for the artist. In April and May he underwent optical operations in Bonn to remove the cataracts in his eyes and restore his vision. The same month the Society of Nigerian Artists under the painter Yusuf Grillo nominated Egonu for Honorary Counsellorship of the International Association of Art. The decision was carried at the association's 10th General Assembly in Finland in May 1983 by an assembly of artist delegates from 38 countries, and in July, the artist was pronounced Honorary Counsellor for Life by the IAA as an expression of its "desire to associate [his] exceptional creative activity henceforth with the life of the International Association of Art."[95] Among the 25 living honourary counsellors at the time were Joan Miro, Henry Moore, Louise Nevelson, Victor Vasarely, and Victor

Pasmore, painting teacher at Camberwell when Egonu joined the college in 1949. Among the 4 dead were Alexander Calder, Sonia Delauney and Juan O'Gorman.[96]

In October Egonu was in Frechen where his work was one of the prints selected for the 7th International Graphics Triennale. His entry, 'A Cup of Coffee in Solitude', was selected by the Frechen triennale and was chosen for the cover of the triennale catalogue. The print caught the eyes of the local press as well, and an article was carried on the artist in the *Kolner Stadt-Unzelger.*[97] He later reported on the Frechen show for the British journal, *Artists Newsletter.*[98]

In December 'A Cup of Coffee in Solitude' was equally selected for World Print Four: An International Survey at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art in California, organised with the California College of Arts and Osaka University of Arts, Japan. Exhibits for the Biennale had been chosen by the World Print Council from work by 225 invited participants from around the world, 100 of which were finally selected out of this number. Other notable artists in the print show were George Baselitz, Fransisco Clemente, and A. R. Penck. In a review in the *San Fransisco Chronicle,* Thomas Albright listed Egonu among the eight artists whose work struck him "because of their uncharacteristic [in terms of this show] simplicity and coherence". Their prints, concluded Albright, "all seem the work of artists who have a clear idea of what they want to say, and then go about doing so cleanly and with authority."[99] The exhibition was later toured through the United States by the Smithsonian Institution. The next year 'A Cup of Coffee in Solitude' won an honorary medal at the 10th International Print Biennale in Cracow, Poland.[100]

Early in 1985 one prospect Egonu had always looked forward to in his career, that of having a personal show in Nigeria, materialised if only in a modest form. An

exhibition of 22 original etchings, screenprints and lithographs, his first ever solo show in Nigeria, was curated by his friend Obiora Udechukwu at the Ana Gallery in Nsukka, and was opened by Nigerian publisher and tycoon Alhaji Abdulaziz Ude, ground-breaking publisher of the Nok cultural imprint and collector of the artist's work. The openning which drew the cream of Igbo literati was chaired by pioneer African literary critic and Dean of the Art Faculty in Nsukka, Professor Donatus Nwoga. Although Egonu was not present, it was a homecoming of sorts for him. Alhaji Ude called on the University of Nigeria to "make it possible for Uzo Egonu to return home by establishing a new chair in this department [of Fine and Applied Arts] and appointing him a visiting Professor of Arts."[101] Although this was not followed up, it renewed Egonu's enthusiasm to visit home, and his hopes for a bigger show in Nigeria soon after.

In July a second exhibition of his work opened at the Galerie Neue Horizonte in Frankfurt. While in Germany for the exhibition, he had a severe heart attack. As he was convalescing from this, he had a repeat in London the next year, and was given a few months to live. Although he chooses to speak very little about this period, he has described the experience as his "traumatic experience",[102] one that changed his life style and further deepened his attitude to life. He began to put his papers and estate together, organise his works and sketches, and to reorder his life and habits. He spent more time indoors except on the mandatory walks recommended by doctors, and within, though he took the medical prediction on his fate seriously, he had some conviction that with proper attention to his health he could beat it. During the period he continued work on his cyle of philosophical paintings, *Will Knowledge Safeguard Freedom*, and out of the experience would late

come another cycle of work aptly titled *A New Lease of Life.*

In New Year Day, 1986, the Greater London Council set up an omnibus exhibition of Egonu's work, *Uzo Egonu Now 1986*, in three venues. *Stateless People*, from his period of poor sight, went on show at the mainstream venue of the Royal Festival Hall in London. A retrospective of his entire printmaking *ouevre* was put on at the Black Arts Gallery in Finsbury Park, and after there at the People's Gallery. Although this celebratory exhibition did not arouse the interest of the mainstream art press and critical establishment in Britain, as indeed Egonu's work had ceased to since the beginning of the seventies despite his successes and international acclaim, it was embraced by a new audience previously ill-exposed to the artist's work. The Black Arts Gallery show gave the Black community an opportunity to see Egonu's work, and though slightly bewildered, a growing Black press took warmly to it. Rave if shallow reviews appeared in *The Voice, Chic, The Weekly Gleaner, African Concord, Westindian Digest, West Indian World*, and many others. Most of the journalists were young and had no knowledge of the artist's existence, and in the mid-eighties atmosphere of growing Black Arts in Britain, they found the artist and his reputation a particular source of affirmation. Particular attention was paid to his affinities with African art and his strong sense of home, which the audience easily identified with. Despite his prominence in the world especially of the graphic arts, Egonu was a discovery, and though he had identified and seen himself as an artist for his community for two decades, this audience was only the identified with him. The circle was full.

In the next few years he would be part of the Blackstream in British art. Later in the year he was approached by Rasheed Araeen, director of the Black Umbrella

Project to participate in a coming exhibition at the Hayward Gallery in 1988-1989. "The aim of the exhibition", wrote Araeen, "is to examine historically the contributions of Afro-Asian artists to the mainstream development in the postwar period in Britain, and to show that their achievement is part of the history of modern art."[103]

If anyone qualified for such acknowledgement it was Egonu, for, despite the gains and achievements of the past two decades, his name was still conspicuously missing from narrations of art in Britain. In his report on the 1983 Frechen Triennale for Artists Newsletter,[104] Egonu had noted with slight grudge that despite all his years working in Britain, he was always listed under his country of origin. This of course would sound ironical and perhaps contradictory for an artist who has consistently prided himself in his origins. Yet there is hardly any inconsistency in expecting that after more than forty years living and over thirty years working in Britain, an artist be seen as part of the British art establishment or landscape. As an elected life fellow of the Royal Society of Arts, a fellow of the London Printmakers Council, a visible graphic artist of international repute and an accomplished painter, Egonu was as qualified as any other artist whatever their nationality for acknowledgement in the histories of postwar art in Britain. In a sense, looking back over three decades, he could see more clearly the validity of Epstein's admonition to him in 1953. Auerbach, Kitaj, Paolozzi and several others already had their places in the histories of 20th century British art, but Egonu and artists of colour like himself would have to look to a different history, a different naration, for their names.

From this moment a marked change in direction was visible in Egonu's career. Not only was he forced to work with reduced elan because of his health, he equally began to withdraw from certain spaces, or from aspiring to them. He became more

involved with Black and younger artists who came to him in recognition. In 1987 he took part in 'Double Vision', an exhibition of ten Black artists at the Christchurch Mansion in Ipswich. Others in the exhibition included radical young Black artists Keith Piper and Tam Joseph. In 1989 he participated in *The Other Story*, the exhibition Araeen had approached him for in 1986. Although a number of Black artists abstained from the exhibition, Egonu was only too knowledgeable in its significance. Despite his health he was at the openning with his wife, holding a copy of a particularly inflamatory and dismissive preview of the exhibition by the British critic Brian Sewell. Sewell's scornful review only underlined the point of the exhibition. In a conversation on the exhibition in 1990 Egonu recalled the fate of his friend Francis Souza who rose to the top of the British art scene in fifties and ruled it till the mid-sixties. "Then, " said Egonu, "after some years, that's full stop. No one wanted to know him. Yes. Because he was non-European. When the media start ignoring the artist, they don't want to know, it ends. That's the thing. Everyone comes to the same boat."[105] That was his own fate.

For Black artists who chose not to participate in the exhibition Egonu only had scorn. They too would learn with time. His own experiences, what he calls his "metaphorical journey through Europe", are not easily summarised. He had known relative success. He sold his works mainly through private agents, especially after, beginning in the seventies, the galleries withdrew from his work. He worked regularly even in poor health, striving strenously to live by his art. Although he describes himself as "more or less invisible",[106] he knew visibility at a stage in his career, and that visibility may have suffered more because of his failing health than through the attitudes of the white art establishment in Britain. He has known

dismissal, deprivation, and discrimination as a non-European artist in Europe, but he chooses not to dwell on it, prefering instead to exert his abilities and press his vision.

Egonu continues to work in his South Kenton house where he lives with his wife and two cats. He still dreams of returning home, but no longer to settle permanently.[107] If there is anything he would want passionately, it is a bigger studio where he can continue his explorations, and the health and wherewithal to travel more often. As for his place as an artist, he is quite satisfied with his efforts. In a press interview in 1990 he said:

> As a non-European artist in Europe, it has not been easy at all. But I feel I've achieved something. In this society there's a time one can't be denied what one has achieved. And I have achieved something.[108]

With the growing discourse around the shortcomings of current narrations of 20th century art, his output and achievement may well reenter the centre of history.

Notes

1. Uzo Egonu, undated personal communication from Bedburg, 1990.

2. Richard Henderson, *The King in Every Man* [New Haven/ London: Yale University Press, 1972] p. 412, Elisabeth Isichei, *The Ibo People and the Europeans: The Genesis of Relationship to* 1906 [New York: St. Martin's Press, 1973] p. 31.

3. G. T. Basden, *Among the Ibos of Nigeria* [London: Seeley, Service and Co. Ltd, 1921] p. 288.

4. Ikenna Nzimiro, *Studies in Ibo Political Systems: Chieftaincy and Politics in Four Niger States* [London: Frank Cass, 1972] p. 252.

5. Ibid., p. 252.

6. Chinua Achebe and Ulli Beier, *The World is a Dancing Masquerade: Conversations* [Bayreuth: Iwalewa Haus, 1990]

7. Nzimiro, op. cit., p. 92.

8. Samuel A. Crowther, in a letter to Venn, 2 December 1858, quoted in F. Ade Ajayi, *Christian Missions in Nigeria 1841-1891: The Making of a New Elite* [London: Longman, Green and Co., 1965] p. 135.

9. Elisabeth Isichei, op. cit., p. 106.

10. Uzo Egonu, communication from Bedburg, 1990, quoted above.

11. Egonu, communication from Bedburg, 1990.

12. Samuel Adjayi Crowther, letter to J. C. Taylor, quoted in G. T. Basden, op. cit., p. 289.

13. Chinua Achebe, 'Onitsha: Gift of the Niger' in *Morning Yet on Creation Day* [London: Heinemann, 1975] p. 90.

14. Isichei, op. cit., p. 102.

15. F. Deaville Walker, *The Romance of The Black River: The Story of the C.M.S. Nigeria Mission* [London: CMS, 1930] p. 212.

16. Achebe, 'Onitsha: Gift of the Niger', p. 191.

17. Egonu, communication from Bedburg, 1990.

18. Achebe, 'Onitsha', p. 92.

19. Chike Akosa, *Heroes and Heroines of Onitsha* [Onitsha: Chike Akosa and Associates, 1987]

20. Achebe, 'Onitsha', p. 92.

21. Egonu, communication from Bedburg, 1990.

22. William N. Geary, *Nigeria Under British Rule* [London: Methuen and Co. Ltd, 1927] p. 173.

23. Uzo Egonu, conversations with this writer, II, South Kenton, September 1990, pp. 15-16.

24. Egonu, conversations, II, September 1990, p. 9.

25. This date is not confirmed since Egonu recollects it rather vaguely. Unfortunately, the artist in question died only shortly after his period with Egonu in 1944 at the age of 36, though the latter did not learn of his death until 1990. Henry Egonu died in 1954. For a brief on John Okechukwu see Akosa, *Heroes and Heroines*, pp. 148-149.

26. Akosa, ibid., pp. 148-9.

27. Conversations, II, September 1990, p. 20.

28. Ibid., p. 7.

29. Uzo Egonu, conversations with this writer, I, South Kenton, January 1990, p. 4.

30. Egonu, conversations, I, January 1990, p. 4. I have had no luck either with tracing other information on this competition or the school's participation. The competition is supposed to have taken place in 1944.

31. Egonu, conversations, I.

32. When the steamer *Empire Windrush* arrived Britain from Jamaica in July 1958 with 492 Jamaicans recruited to help in the post-war reconstruction, the new Nationality Act of 1948 gave them and their families the right of permanent residence. The atmosphere of this gesture would be reversed in the next two decade, beginning with the 1962 Commonwealth Immigration Act.

33. Rasheed Araeen, *The Other Story: Afro-Asian Artists in Post-War Britain* [London: South Bank Centre, 1989] p. 25.

34. Simon Wilson, *British Art: From Holbein to the Present Day* [London: The Tate Gallery & The Bodley Head, 1979] p. 153.

35. Egonu, comunication with this writer, March 1990, p.1.

36. Although the artist has always given 1952 as his year of graduation from Camberwell, this is mistaken. A Testimonial signed by the Principal of the College, J. W. Wright, Head of the Printing Department at Camberwell, Ref. JWW/HH on 22 March 1962 [the original was lost with other documents earlier mentioned] indicates that he was at Camberwell between 10 January 1949 and 10th October 1951, the normal course duration of 3 years.

37. Ibid., p. 3.

38. Conversations with this writer, I, March 1990, p. 12. See also Egonu, 'My Metaphoric Journey in The West', paper delivered at the symposium on 'Neue Kunst aus Nigeria im Internationalen Kontext', Dusseldorf, November 7-8, 1991, p. 1.

39. Balraj Khanna recalls this period and the environment which he describes as "largely hostile" with lingering pain. On one occasion, he carried a huge oil painting all the way from Golders Green to a West End gallery where he was given an appointment only to be refused audience. Bitter and much pained both spiritually and physically, he and the friend who helped carry the huge painting to the gallery eventually hauled it into the Thames and returned home. "Often," recalls Khanna, "I thought of chucking it all in, of returning home." See Khanna, 'England: my brave new world', in Araeen, *The Other Story*, pp. 108-110.

40. Uzo Egonu, 'About Myself and My Work', unpublished biographical brief, 1970, p. 8.

41. Egonu, undated biographical brief.

42. Ibid.

43. Quoted in Araeen, *The Other Story*, p. 88.

44. Conversation with this writer, I, January 1990, p. 5.

45. See Testimonial from the L.C.C Saint Martin's School of Art on William Ogonu [sic], signed by Edward J. Morss, ARCA, Principal of the school and dated 11 November 1959. Artist's private papers.

46. Egonu, conversations with the author, IV, South Kenton, February 1990, p. 1.

47. Uzo Egonu, 'Reflections of Uzo Egonu: Contemporary Nigerian Artist, Interviewed by H. Streicher', unpublished manuscript, 1966, revised, 1975, p. 30.

48. See letter of acceptance signed by Charles Anderson for A. N. Holden & Co., Incorporated Practictioners in Advertising, London, 6 February 1961. Artist's private papers.

49. Letter to the artist from Rev. Patrick Brock, 15 November 1960. Artist's private papers.

50. 'Reflections', p. 10.

51. I owe this insight to the critic and art historian Dennis Duerden who discussed the period with me in his home in East London in 1990.

52. Conversations with Duerden, 1990. See also Guy Brett, 'Internationalism among artists in the 60s and 70s' in Araeen, *The Other Story*, pp. 111-114.

53. Araeen, *The Other Story*, p. 131.

54. Letter signed by Page for Milton Grundy, Chairman, Gemini Trust Limited, 28 October, 1964. Artist's private papers.

55. Barbara Wright, 'Eight Artists', *The Arts Review*, 20 February - 6 March, 1965.

56. 'For Art's Sake', *Eastern Daily Press*, 19 April, 1965.

57. Letter from Andrew Dodd, MSIA, Brighthinsea, Essex to Egonu, 24 April 1965. Artist's private papers.

58. Ronald Moody, 'Uzo Egonu', *MagnetNews*, 10-23 April, 1965.

59. 'Chronique du Festival Mondial des Arts Negres', *Senegal D'Aujourd'hui*, April 1966. See also, *Federal Nigeria*, special issue dedicated to Dakar Festival of Negro Arts, Vol. 9, Nos. 3 & 4, 1966.

60. Letter to Egonu signed by Austace Spencer Pryse for Upper Grosvenor Galleries, 14 May 1966. Artist's private papers.

61. Reviewed by Max Wykes-Joyce for the *Arts Review*, 20 August, 1966. Egonu's 'Two Fighting Cocks' was listed among the pictures the critic considered "worth comment."

62. Letter from H. B. Frankel, Organising secretary, Leicester University Arts Festival [Britain and Commonwealth], dated 28 June 1966. Artist's private papers.

63. *The World in Perspective*, Upper Grosvenor Galleries, July 1968.

64. Ibid.

65. Dennis Duerden, Uzo Egonu, *Arts Review with Auction and Gallery Guide*, Vol. xx, No. 14, 20 July 1968.

66. *Daily Mirror*, Wednesday, July 17, 1968.

67. See *Stroud News and Journal*, Thursday, November 19, 1970.

68. Letter from Donald Bowen, Curator of the Commonwealth Institute Art Gallery, 21 November, 1969. Artist's private papers.

69. November 19, 1970.

70. *Standard Bank Review*, December 1970

71. *What's On in Nairobi*, Vol. VI, 25-31 January, 1971.

72. "Nigerian artist now lives in South Kenton", *Wembley News*, Friday 29 October, 1971.

73. Letter from James Currey, Heinemann Education Books to Egonu, 10 June 1970.

74. *Arts Review*, Vol. XXV, No. 11, 2 June, 1973.

75. Emmanuel Jegede, 'The Vision of Uzo Egonu,' *West Africa*, No. 2922, 11 June, 1973.

76. Adeyemo Adekeye, 'Uzo Egonu of Nigeria', *African Arts*, Autumn 1973, p. 34.

77. Flyer issued by the University of Lancaster, announcing a talk by Egonu on November 26th, 1974.

78. A letter of 26 March, 1975 signed by Earl Cameron, chair of the United Kingdom African Festival Committee and directed to Egonu enclosed a cheque for £62 for his participation in selecting artists for the festival. Artist's private papers.

79. Letter signed by A. O. Oluseyi for the secretary, Nigeria National Participation Secretariat, National Theatre Lagos, 18 August 1976. Artist's private papers.

80. Taiwo Ajayi, secretary to the United Kingdom African Festival Committee. Undated letter to Egonu. Artist's private papers.

81. Conversations with the writer, II, 30 September, 1990, p. 1.

82. A reproduction of the print was carried in the Observer magazine pick-of-the-week, 'Upfront'. *Observer*, 29 July, 1979.

83. Letter from the Iraqi Cultural Centre, London, signed by Kate Aldridge, 28 March, 1980.

84. Letter from Rudolf Mayer, Internationelle Buchkunst-Austellung, Liepzig, 16 August 1976. Artist's private papers.

85. Invitation to Egonu from Mevlin Ekmecio, Director of the Yugoslav Portrait Gallery, Tuzla, 31 November, 1979.

86. Uzo Egonu, untitled manuscript, 1986, p. 2.

87. Ibid., p.2.

88. 'Reflections', p. 13.

89. Uzo Egonu, 'Painting in darkness 1979-1983', untitled, undated manuscript, attributed to 1984 in *Uzo Egonu: Lithographs, Etchings & Screenprints* 1979-1983, catalogue of exhibition, Black Art Gallery, London, 1986.

90. Minutes of Jury, Unesco Poster and Calender Competition, 16 March, 1981, p. 4. Artist's private papers.

91. Egonu, 'Painting in Darkness', p. 2.

92. Ibid., p. 2.

93. Obiora Udechukwu, 'Okike 10th Anniversary: An Exhibition of Drawings, Prints and Watercolours', catalogue of exhibition at the Continuing Education Centre, University of Nigeria, Nsukka, 1982.

94. George Sorley Whittet, original English text of review, 1982. Artist's private papers.

95. Letter of conferment from Marshall Malagola, IAA, 5 July 1983, Ref. 73 25:C.71. Artist's private papers.

96. UNESCO, 'Honourary Counsellors [for Life], International Association of Art [UNESCO], Paris, 1983'. Document among artist's private papers.

97. 'Wahl der Titelgrafik uberraschte Uzo Egonu', *Kolher Stadt-Unzeiger*, 12 October, 1983.

98. Uzo Egonu, 'International Graphic Triennale', *Artists Newsletter*, December 1983.

99. Thomas Albright, 'A Pair of Print Shows - Having It Both Ways', *San Fransisco Chronicle*, 11 October 1983.

100. See letter from Mrs Irena Gabar-Jatczak, Director of the Polish Cultural Institute, London, 5 October 1984. Artist's private papers.

101. Text of speech by Alhaji Abdulaziz C. Ude, Nsukka, 16 January, 1985, p. 5. Unpublished. Artist's private papers.

102. Uzo Egonu, 'The circumstances leading to the creation of the work', undated manuscript. Artist's private papers. Also see Hiltrud Streicher and Uzo Egonu, 'Reflections of Uzo Egonu', *Third Text*, Autumn/Winter 1989, pp. 173-182 into which the editors collapsed the above manuscript and others.

103. Letter from Rasheed Araeen, 14 November, 1986. Artist's private papers.

104. Egonu, 'International Graphic Triennale'.

105. Conversations with this writer, I, South Kenton, January 1990, p. 12.

106. Ibid., p. 14.

107. Guy Kinder, 'Uzo Egonu: A study of the artistic evolution of a Nigerian painter living and working in contemporary Europe', Unpublished Dissertation for the third year, Drawing and Painting, Duncan of Jordanstone College of Art, 1981, p. 34

108. In Omotayo Afolabi, 'Our Nigerian: Uzo Egonu, Painting the Soul', *Nigerian Homenews*, 22-28 February, 1990.

Chapter Four

THE EGONU AESTHETIC

If we go by the theory outlined in chapter two, a number of logically related questions arise. First, can we read[1] an artist's work? Second, should we read an artist's work? And third, if so, how do we read the work? Reading, or the use of interpretative/decoding tools, presumes the possibility of 'meaning' and, indeed, of the validity of such exercise. True, it can be accepted that if all existence has meaning, in the sense, at least, of a reason for being, so does the work of art. The possibility of meaning, however, does not in itself necessarily guarantee access to meaning nor does it justify the priorisation of the search for this meaning.[2]

One point we seem to have driven over is; can we synonymise reading, therefore, with 'the search for meaning', or can reading come short of, or go beyond the search for meaning? One would like to posit that the essence of reading is understanding. Whether understanding is necessary for appreciation is another question which in itself leans on what one means by appreciation, itself a problematic signifier.[3] One assumption, though, is that the critic's vocation is about reading, about understanding, for only with understanding is the critic able to evaluate the work of art or offer grounds for its valuation.[4] While the art historian may not necessarily engage in evaluation and explication as locate the work within a historical context, a socio-historical ambience, understanding the work of art is essential in art history.

In a sense, therefore, the essence of understanding would not necessarily be the quest for meaning. Description equally demands a form of understanding.

Reading may thus constitute a search for greater understanding, and such understanding may well be served by descriptive knowledge rather than meaning. Reading may, after all, be about the application of this descriptive knowledge to understanding. When we talk about the futility of absolute comprehension of the work of art, we may equally mean the plurality of descriptive possibilities rather than just a multiplicity of meanings. It should be noted that the original source of the terms 'text' and 'context', the Latin *texere*, to weave, or interwork, or en-'tangle' in an orderly and methodical manner, implies that the essence of reading is to dis-en-tangle strands of the specific text for reasons of better understanding. The process of dis-entangling, while it yields knowledge about parts and the pattern of their construction into text or object, does not necessarily offer a grasp of meaning. Also, the discovery of a system of patterns through the disentangling of several objects belonging to a common culture or provenance, may offer explanations for such pattern, and correlatives in other aspects of life within the group, but such explanations do not in themselves constitute meaning. Ultimately, if there is meaning, it must reside within the specific relationship between the object and its contemplator, and while we may explain the workings of the parts of this specific object by locating them within a pattern, we are not necessarily led any further than such discovery. In other words to answer the question *why* is not to offer or find meaning.

If we accept that reading is, after all, not necessarily about 'meaning' but about the understanding of parts, and that this pattern exists in an endless body of possibilities dependent on several determinants such as we have tried to enumerate

in the outline of our theory, the most important of the questions becomes; how do we read the work of art?

To attempt an answer requires that we address certain questions of traditional aesthetic inquiry such as: what is art? what is beauty? in what lies the essence of the work of art and what is the nature of this essence? what is the nature and source of art?[5], questions which were not addressed in the preceding chapter. The subject of aesthetics has not as yet entered the centre of discourse on African art except with regard to so-called traditional art.[6] In a sense, new tendencies in African art seem not to have qualified for aesthetic inquiry, and very well so if one goes by the pattern of current aesthetic theories of African art which are in the line and language of the grand narratives we saw. The question(s) of aesthetics require(s) a lot more space and depth than we could possibly afford in this study. But, to suggest the concept of an individual aesthetic, which our anti-grand narrative theory implies among other things, requires that we at least define our understanding of aesthetics and its implications for historical and critical practice.

First, it would make sense to distinguish between the terms 'aesthetic', and 'aesthetics'. On the latter, it would be observed that the term seems always to be defined indirectly by the enumeration of its concerns rather than directly. Tatarkiewicz,[7] for instance, talks about the existence of archaic Aesthetics [the aesthetic exercise/preoccupation] without aesthetic theory [methodical, institutionalised theoretical framework], suggesting we can have aesthetics without systems of methodical contemplation or inquiry, and that the two cannot be safely synonymised under the same term. This contradicts Lord Quinton's definition of "philosophical study of art, and also of nature to the extent that we take the same

attitude to it as we do to art".[8] Wittgenstein ridicules the idea of a definition or even a science of aesthetics in his famous Cambridge lectures on the subject.[9] The only clear thing about aesthetics, then, is that there is neither a clear definition for it in scholarship, nor even a consensus on its concerns.

If we should take the questions raised above as some of the more fundamental concerns of traditional aesthetic inquiry, we might provisionally define aesthetics as *the contemplation of the essential character of art*, or the aesthetic element, that which invests the object or entity - since object implies a physical materiality which cannot encompass the totality of art[10] - with artness. On this we would agree that although we all seem to converge on what is broadly qualified as art, we are bound, as all aesthetic discourse have proved from the time of the Greeks, to vary on the specific question of what makes the object of art Art.

In the major epochs of western philosophical inquiry the location of artness, if we may use that phrase, has moved from mimesis to a period of crisis as modernism removed this as the essential character or condition of art without replacing it.[11] In much 20th century aesthetic discourse, the character of art is seen to reside in what is vaguely identified as the aesthetic state or attitude, or more precisely, in the perceived ability of the object or work to evoke this aesthetic state in the contemplator.[12]

By this theory 'artness' becomes subjective, no longer an undoubtably intrinsic character of the work of art but an extrinsic element dependent on the individual human contemplator. It could be argued that the object or work gains or loses this element in accordance with the state of the contemplator's intellect or mind at a particular moment. While it is posited that the object or piece of art is Art because

it induces an aesthetic attitude in the contemplator, it is indeed equally clear, and more importantly so, that the same object or piece may simultaneously fail to induce the same state in another contemplator. It is one approach to attribute this to the aesthetic ability or sensibility of the viewer, as Vernon Lee would[13], and to distinguish between the "practical or scientific" individual and the "aesthetic"[14]. The danger here is that we seem to deny some individuals the gift or ability of aesthetic contemplation, which is hard to establish. A more realistic approach, within the framework of the theory of aesthetic attitude, is to conclude that while to one viewer or contemplator, the object or piece is art, possessing the ability to evoke the aesthetic attitude, to another it is not art since it fails to do the same.

One thing this theory has done, without the immediate acknowledgement of many of its postulators, is to put a distance between the aesthetic element and Beauty or Pleasure, the traditional Western conditions of art. For instance, while Morris subscribes to the theory of aesthetic attitude, he still insists that the resolution of the art process, the process "through which creation and appreciation are sustained", is "the apprehended form, that is, beauty"[15]. The inherent inconsistency in this, of course, is that if the aesthetic character resides in the contemplator, it is also the contemplator who decides its definitive nature. Unless we can agree on the specific nature of the aesthetic state or attitude, it is illogical to qualify it. And even when we do accept that Beauty, whatever it is, or the element of Pleasure, constitutes the essential condition of art, because this theory subjectivises the artistic character, it also cedes the definition of Beauty or Pleasure to the individual contemplator rather than the philosopher or aesthetic theorist. While the question of Beauty has occupied aesthetic inquiry from the Greeks to Lee, the subjectivisation of the aesthetic element

effectively deletes that which is taken for granted and in so doing demands, in the least, new approaches to problems. Such matters as interest, unity, distance and contemplation, should they remain aspects of aesthetic inquiry, each now requires great broadening of meaning. Aesthetics and "the purpose of aesthetic theory" cease from being "unquestionably to help us understand the beautiful and the ugly" as Morris would have us accept[16], just as art further eludes definition, justifying, as Morawski has observed,[17] the position of many recently that it is doubtful whether there can or should eventually be a definition of art.

This position indeed finds a level of validation in the discrepant manner in which western scholarship qualifies objects of material culture from non-Western societies as art when their specific aesthetic status within the provenant cultures may be ambiguous or indeterminate. In recent literature, Cesare Poppi has raised questions over whether it is right to invest colourful Ghanaian coffins with what he calls "aesthetic dignity",[18] as Jean-Hubert Martin and Susan Vogel have done.[19] In other words the fact that the essential character of art or the aesthetic status of the object, is culture-specific, as this implies and as we also noted in the preceding chapter, invalidates the possibility of an absolute, universal definition, on one hand, and the ultimate subjectivisation of the aesthetic factor subverts an objective category, on the other.

Beret Lang has raised one question, though incorrectly, which our seemingly pontificatory conclusion also raises. In his essay on "Intentionality and the ontology of Art"[20] and in order to establish what he calls "aesthetic texture", another term for the condition of art, he submits:

> If for example, there were no grounds for distinguishing aesthetic (in some sense) from non-aesthetic quality, we could expect to find no

> differences in the aesthetic potentials of various objects or moments. All moments would be of equal aesthetic relevance or irrelevance; and it would follow from this in turn that neither the viewer nor the object of his experience contributes differentially to its then nondiscriminable aesthetic quality: that any viewer and any object equal every other in their respective potentials for aesthetic experience.[21]

This of course is an extreme simplification of the issue. The question is not whether Lang's aesthetic texture exists, but that of its determinacy and the specific grounds for its determination. It is quite logical, in contrast to Lang's position, for something to exist without it being determinable. It is possible for an object to possess aesthetic potentials and yet for one to fail to notice or define this potential. The fundamental mistake is for us to talk about aesthetic conclusions in the personal plural, as he does here. If aesthetic perception is returned to the individual, it can be seen that each individual would be able to tell between the aesthetic object and the non-aesthetic, except that the singular object now has the potential to be both aesthetic and nonaesthetic, depending on the individual contemplator. Western modernist art has already shown this, as does much so-called post-modernist art. The controversial case of the acquisition of Carl Andre's minimalist pile of bricks, *Equivalent VIII* by the Tate Gallery in 1976, a year after Lang's book was published, and the outrage it stirred as sections of the British public demanded its dismantling,[22] is significant, especially for the reason that although the work did not possess any aesthetic potentials for many, it did for at least the artist and the gallery that acquired it.

It does not also necessarily follow that, by this, all objects possess equal aesthetic potential. The answer to the level of aesthetic potential in any object or phenomenon lies in two things. The first is in the distinction between the natural and the manually manipulated, whether this manipulation is physical, mental, or

conceptual.[23] In other words we need to agree that the human element is a condition of art. Subsequently, the aesthetic potentials of a phenomenon depend on its malleability to transfiguration through human action, including the investment of aesthetic significance or relevance. Thus the potentials in a sense depend on the individual human actor, artist or contemplator.[24] And none of these implies that the aesthetic texture, which must be distinguished from aesthetic potential, is determinable or definable, or that, as Lang puts it, "a line between the work of art and the nonwork or lesser work of art was indeed visible".[25]

This raises problems for the traditional critical vocations of interpretation, valuation, and evaluation. If we cannot determine the aesthetic texture in the phenomenon, and thus its aesthetic status, can we interpret it? And should we agree on the status of the work of art, can we evaluate it? Like in the later part of Lang's position quoted above, Herbert Marcuse[26] posits the constant of some universal for the distinction of 'great art', what he refers to as "aesthetic criteria previously defined as constitutive of 'authentic' or 'great' art". According to him,

> throughout the long history of art, and in spite of changes in taste, there is a standard which remains constant. This standard not only allows us to distinguish between "high" and "trivial" literature, opera and operetta, comedy and slapstick, but also between good and bad art within these genres.[27]

Earlier in the text Marcuse points out that although his theory specifically addresses literature and not music or the visual arts, "what holds true for literature, *mutatis mutandis*, may also apply to these arts". Although Marcuse's *Aesthetic Dimension* is proposed by the author as a revolutionary revision of the Marxist aesthetic, it must be pointed out how conservative and outdated is its position on the question of evaluation. Both Hume and Kant had dealt with these questions with differing levels

of vagueness and ambiguity of conclusion. But, despite the characteristic contradictions in Hume's philosophical submissions, he does conclude that the critic must allow for differences in evaluation and reception consequent upon the fact that an artist addressed a different epoch or nation.[28] Also, despite Kant's proposition of the *Sweckmassigkeit ohne Zweck*, purposeless purposiveness, which is not subjective and is central in aesthetic contemplation, he did largely uphold the subjectivity and non-universality of aesthetic evaluation. In other words, while aesthetic activity is universal, the content and form of this activity is not. Quite interestingly, Marcuse's supposedly visionary post-Marxist aesthetic does not even go as far as Hegel's pre-Marxist proposition that "every work belongs to its age, its nation, and its environment and depends upon particular historical and other ideas and aims".[29] Hegelian aesthetics broadly imply group standards, but categorically deny the universal standard which Marcuse posits.

It is not our intention here to confuse or synonymise critical evaluation with aesthetic inquiry, but the two are inseparably bound in that it is the broad concepts of aesthetic theory that are brought into appreciation. If, as we are inclined to posit, there is no such universal even within the singular society or culture [and Morawski has pointed this out in an anecdotal thesis, though he later contradicts his own findings by evoking the "authentic work of art",[30]] if we accept that no one's conclusions on taste and quality are indisputable and that, in the long run, the concept of *gustibus non-disputandum* is invalid, it seems sensible to explore other preoccupations for aesthetic inquiry and appreciation. As Dickie concludes, indeed "the concept of art may be too rich to be captured in the traditional manner."[31]

The decision or definition of value, originality or greatness of the work of art,

may well not be the most fruitful preoccupaions for art history. In his treatment of the philosophical question of genius and greatness, Theodore Green[32] touches on what may indeed prove a more rewarding line of inquiry. Although, as Morawski has pointed out, he avoids the equation of value with the artist's philosophy, we think that the question perhaps should not be one of value but of the centrality of the relationship between the artist's philosophy, his "vision" if we may use that term, and intent, and the resolution of these in the work of art. Morawski expresses strong reservation with "the view that the evaluational criteria of art should be turned towards the connection of the work of art with the creative process behind it"[33]. But as long as the vocation is not criticism or evaluation, the connection between the creative process, or rather the creative genesis, remains central to art historical inquiry. The creative genesis, broadly speaking, goes beyond the immediate conception of the specific work of art and its execution, in other words the creative process, to include the individual artist's vision and background, what Morawski describes, if cynically so, as "a certain residue of an artist's experience" coupled with his specific attitude to the creative task, his individual method. It seems rather more valid to direct discourse more realistically, towards the creator of the art object, and the individual's personal code for investing the object with aesthetic quality; the condition of art according to the artist. This way the object of study moves from the aesthetic as adjective to include the aesthetic as noun.

The intention here is to seek instead, especially in our case, what constitutes the art in the art object to the individual artist, the conscious manufacturer of the cultural object. In other words, what is the artist's aesthetic or, as Houston Baker has put it, the "distinctive code for the creation and evaluation" of the work of art. The

subsequent questions of essence and its nature would logically fall in here in the definition of the specific relationship between that which is art and the reality which encompasses, informs, or otherwise issues from it; how the artist defines the element of art in the object and how he constructs or abstracts this element, as the case may be, and employs it to transform the object material or immaterial, into art. This is what we mean by the individual aesthetic, the personal *language.*[34]

THE AESTHETIC GENESIS

Egonu's search for a personal aesthetic began long after Camberwell and reached a watershed in the middle of the sixties, especially noticeable in the painting, "Nude Woman Combing Her Hair". It is not very clear when "Nude Woman Combing Her Hair" was painted. The artist identifies it as having been done in 1964,[35] but in the 1966 interview with Hiltrud Streicher it is dated 1965. The painting also appears in the Ronald Moody review in the *Magnet* in 1965 which suggests that it was either done in 1964 or early in 1965. The work belongs to the group of paintings done by the artist after his 1963 painting, "Mask with Musical Instruments" which he has described as his "Bridge" into the period that began in 1964.[36] "Mask", according to the artist, revealed to him "different possibilities in the art of painting" and changed his artistic vision. It was the effective milestone in his transition from what may be termed his "naivist" period during which he consciously fought the legacies of the academy by insisting on a boldness of concept and freedom with elements including colour, depth and anatomy, and subverting the thematic expectations of the art school experience. The artist has noted that his works till 1963 were influenced by

his student days[37] and at a point in his development, he had to break away from that hold if he must discover his true creative personality and invest his works with a peculiar identity removed from conventions.

THE RESTLESS YEARS

Although he identifies 1964 as his "period of restlessness",[38] that search for the self, the effort to discover a personal 'voice' and vision, began earlier than 1963.

As has been indicated, the artist's aesthetic odyssey could be chronologically partitioned into specific phases. After his tour of Europe visiting galleries and museums and studying works of the great masters Western and African, he returned spiritually saturated from what was an invaluable and most enthralling experience. With so much imbibed, a young artist is prone to regurgitate the knowledge with youthful fervour and little need for reflections beyond technical understanding. The study tours were an extension of the academy, an adventure into secrets which the art school could not reveal and which only first hand contact, a visual and mental confrontation with the masters and their works and a dialogue with their methods and lives in their own presence, could offer. After that the young artist is filled with confidence of his discoveries and could afford greater freedom and a redefined sense of discipline, but not necessarily a new vision. On the other hand these discoveries could arouse self-doubt and dissatisfaction in the artist, and consequently a determination to reassess his knowledge and methods and redefine his approach.

Egonu's study tours resulted in the later, for although he continued to work in a style akin to that of the immediate post-Camberwell paintings till the end of the

fifties, there was growing dissatisfaction in his work and the period, especially closer to the end of the decade could be likened to Pollock's psychoanalytic period. As Elizabeth Frank has observed, what many have misinterpreted as Jungian works from this period in Pollock's work are indeed products of an "extraordinary struggle to assimilate important external influences into tumultuous interior energies that sorely needed direction".[39] According to Frank, the works in question are "frequently imperfect and awkward, and show evidence of aesthetic hard work." Egonu destroyed about thirty works in 1959 so he could reuse the canvas.[40] According to Hiltrud, he would load them into the huge bath at the Goldhurst Terrace flat, and soak them in water, and she would scrub the paint off them and they would be hung to dry. Although this could be attributed to hardship, it would be a very extreme situation to require such action.

During this period Miss Streicher was beginning to introduce some sense of order and a greater awareness of the need for proper documentation into Egonu's practice as opposed to the understandable disorderliness and carefreeness of a young artist. Thus a more likely suggestion would be that the destruction of the paintings may not completely be unrelated to the frustrating experience of discovering in them a hitherto unrevealed handicap, namely, the inability to arrest the overwhelming experience of his contact with both European masters and African art traditions, because, as the young artist realises, art school had not properly equipped him to do so. This factor, for instance, was partly responsible for Picasso's years of restlessness in Paris and Barcelona between 1901 and 1902.[41]

The most interesting twist here is the element of contact with Paris. It should be noted that Pollock's years of frustration were mainly the consequence of his efforts

to "assimilate important external influences (chiefly the School of Paris)" and to "confront his major and still very much alive precursors Picasso and Miro",[42] the same confrontation which Egonu had with the masters, although in his case not Picasso and Miro but inevitably including them, in his travels through Europe, but most especially in his period in Paris where he spent the longest period. Arianna Huffington has described Picasso's mood in Paris in 1901 as that of "existential nothingness",[43] one of "not knowing what other road to try." Picasso's problem was not only one of poverty but also that of digesting Paris, the Daumiers and Durers which Max Jacob loaded him with, as well as organizing and reconciling the "surge of experimentation"[44] which his contact with Paris had unleashed. It is equally interesting that Huffington observes a connection between the growing darkness and torment in Picasso and the advent of Pere Manyac, the art dealer, in Picasso's life. According to her, the artist was in a process of rebellion against the orderliness which Manyac had brought into his work and life. It is unclear whether Hiltrud's entry into Egonu's life at the period of the destroyed paintings could have contributed to his unconfessed frustration: the unconscious need to satisfy a scrutinising presence, a process which is not only human but equally aesthetic.

THE NOSTALGIA PERIOD

If Picasso's frustration drove him into the blue period and eventually into even further frustration of a different kind in Barcelona, Egonu was determined to find his way through in his grope for direction. From 1960 he moved into what might be called his years of nostalgia. As if marooned and rootless, he began to clutch at

strands of memory from his childhood in Africa. Without meaning to stretch the analogy, it should be observed also that in his frustrated years in Paris Picasso began his recovery by moving closer to and consolidating the Spanish group in Place Jean-Baptiste-Clemente. "Picasso", according to Huffington, "needed his Spanish friends around him, and they all needed a spot they could turn into the hub of their centrifugal existence, a little bit of Spain in the middle of a city that ...overwhelmed them".[45] This was easy for Picasso for a number of reasons which were not applicable in Egonu's case. First, Picasso had only been in Paris a year. Second, there was a community of young Spaniards in Paris with like dispositions and interests. To rally them round was thus physically practicable, and replicating Spain was possible not only imaginatively but practically.

In Egonu's case he had been in London for approximately eleven years, and in Britain for sixteen, enough time for someone who came at the age of thirteen to find a remarkable wall between him and home. In that period he had not visited home, and his links with it, as we saw earlier, had been further harmed both by the death of his father and, at this period, the disillusioning attitude of the Nigerian authorities to his pleas for encouragement. The opportunity which Camden Town and the West African Students Union provided during the Camberwell years was no longer there, and the community which was then available was no more within reach, giving the artist's natural disposition as a loner. There seems to be a valid connection between the frustrations of aesthetic development within an overwhelming foreign culture, and the desperation to return home. The moment of awareness of difference, and consciousness of the instinct for self identity, could be likened to that of a swimmer's awareness of drowning when he must cling to something, clutch at every

lean straw within reach to avoid losing himself.

One significant consequence of Egonu's tours in Europe was that he was now able to transfer an awareness of his difference into his own work and the forging of his aesthetic personality. What emerged was a heightened critical and discriminating consciousness which dictated that if there must be a distinction of the self politically, this must also be projected artistically. Coming in contact with works of African classical civilisations prompted a silent comparison and the underlining of the possibility of equality without compromise of the self. There was also a realisation that each culture and artistic tradition rivetted on itself and derived both its fulfilment, greatness and vision within its own space. The essential ethnocentricity of art, whether in thematic terms or in form, became clearer with his exposure to the diversity which he came in touch with. At this stage, it would also have occurred to him that side by side with this ethnocentricity is a discriminate eclecticism as could be seen in crosses between the different cultures of Europe and in those between Europe and other cultures. Much later, the artist would reply in an interview: "Aesthetics is aesthetics. It is a question of looking at something as a work of art and not whether it was produced in Japan or the artist was African or British".[46] The very fact of electing at a stage to pursue a unique line of aesthetic identity defined by a desire to relate to "home" removes the contradiction in this seemingly universalist definition of aesthetics. What is meant here is not some uniformity or universality of aesthetic signifiers but that the aesthetic product should be appreciated irrespective of its provenance or the nationality of its creator.

Through his confrontation with the great art of all cultures the artist found a base line, if we may use that term, which is the ability of the object to induce the

aesthetic state without necessary invocation of its provenance, which in itself does not deny it the identity of that provenance. He also discovered how much every artistic tradition owes to others while still finding some elements which define its peculiarity.

Another factor in this odyssey which we have severally hinted at is the socio-political ambience of the late fifties and early sixties, referred to as the period of the African dawn. As Negritude made its exit in controversy and ultimate ideological ridicule[47], the anti-colonial struggles were centre stage, making regular kills. The emergence and rise of the independent state of Ghana coincided with an almost global Black consciousness which soon paralleled in the civil rights movement in America. This was the period of the 'African personality', and if the artist had a momentary detachment from this spirit due to his movement from Camden Town, his travels reaffirmed it.

In moments of nationalist pride it is natural that every exile should seek out his own nationality and every artist define the repositories and signifiers of this nationality. There is no indication that any of these elements worked at a particularly conscious level with Egonu, but they all worked together to initiate the beginning of his process of serious self definition. Together they induced a form of nostalgia which found expression in the art.

One of the earliest paintings of the period, "A Boy with a Budgerigar" (1960) was inspired by memories of his father and brothers.[48] The Budgerigar represents his father's parrot which was much loved by the boys, and the boy his brothers. Of another painting from 1960, "A Boy Eating Sweetcorn" he says: "I chose the subject because of nostalgic feelings for my country; the feeling of being far away from home

evoked these images in my mind".[49] This was followed by paintings of genre and scenes from Africa: "Village Blacksmith in Iboland" (1961), portraits of African women: "Portrait of a Nigerian Girl" (1961), "Portrait of a Guinea Girl" (1962), another version of "A Boy with a Budgerigar" (1963) and "A Boy Eating Sweetcorn" (1963).

All these were characterised by a deliberate naivete, a conscious subversion of western conventions of realism. Although realism was not his greatest strength, he did work to improve his life drawing around this period. At the same time, the paintings show an effort to subvert whatever canons could have been derived from the evening lessons he took at St. Martins. He felt with his colours and sought greater freedom with his imagination. Bodies were executed in a woolly manner that disregards skeletal exactitude. In "A Boy Eating Sweetcorn" (1961) the dog in the background is merely outlined without any concern for depth, modelling or colour. In the 1963 "Boy with a Budgerigar" he begins to introduce an indiscriminate application of polychrome irrespective of local colour, guided more by a design instinct than by the reality of objective visual observation. According to the artist he had little regard for "aesthetics" at this time, meaning conventional Western canons of representation. The aim was to discard once and for all, whatever inhibitions and restrictions art school had imposed, and thus clear the way for a true self discovery and definition. Realism represented this, and it had to be disobeyed, ignored, twisted, mocked and ridiculed. Reflecting on this in 1989 he said rather mockingly, "Twenty years ago the Royal Academy here, they would insist that they look at things in a particular way, as if you were competing with 2nd century art. And you wonder, why don't they engage a photographer and be done with it?".[50]

It is interesting that, in the final analysis, the early departures of the Nostalgia

period were arguably more thematic than particularly formalistic in the broad context of prevailing art in the West. Two arguments could be made here. One is that while the artist sought to depart from the West and seek a different identity, he was in fact still caught up in the space of what he saw in Europe and noticed more and more clearly around him. Because Western modernism had departed from the academy, the identified symbol of the West in Egonu's vision and thus object of his opposition, and so before he did, he could only depart at this stage from Camberwell and its Flemish tendencies and canons. It could indeed be argued that the artist conceived of return to the native land not in clear formalistic terms and that the recollection of memories from childhood in whatever self-constructed counter-form from Camberwell was sufficient.

On the other hand, it could also be argued first that this was considerably an early stage in his search for personal language to exhibit too radical a departure. Picasso's Blue Period, formalistically speaking, cannot be compared in any way to the radicalism of the Cubist period which came much later as the artist pursued his departure from Barcelona and "Science and Charity". Thus Egonu's "Boy with a Budgerigar", relatively conservative as it is, can be considered in every sense a successful departure from whatever represented for him the host culture at the moment, namely Camberwell. Second, it is also valid to state that if the works are caught in what may be perceived as the space of Western modernism with its polychromatism and disregard for realism, anatomical exactitude and all other trappings of the academy, the African artist working within this space is indeed back in his own space, since it is to a considerable extent merely an appropriated space. In this sense, the works from the Nostalgia period, though they identify nostalgia and

its appeasement as the central tropes of self-definition, also make remarkable formalistic strides in defining that self.

It is unarguable that the specifics of that individual identity were yet beyond grasp. Quite interesting is the fact that the artist's figures and his themes from this period drew closer and closer to those of the Murray school or 'popular' Nigerian art in their simplicity and unpretentiousness, though his equally growing sophistication and mastery of media are evident. There is a feeling of the school text illustrations and class room murals produced by Murray's pupils in the 1930s and 1940. That one also notices this feel, the preoccupation with genre and folk themes, in Enwonwu's paintings of the 1950s such as "Fulani Girl" and "Hausa Man" raises two questions. One is whether Egonu's relationship with Enwonwu had anything to do with his works from 1960 to 1963. The second is to what extent the artist defined his roots in line with orthodox Western stereotypes, giving the Western disposition to naive art as representing authentic Africanness. Although this attitude had not gained wide application before this period, it does however nearly coincide with the rise of such schools as Oshogbo and Shona in Africa and the advent of the tourist icons of Africanity.

It is difficult to profer a verifiable answer to the first question, but it is doubtful that the artist was in contact with Enwonwu during this period. The second is even more difficult to answer since, though the Congo school had been going in the 1950s, Egonu was unaware of it, and this period in his work, as we have observed, preceded the rise of Oshogbo and other centres of so-called "authentic" African art. What one sees from his case and that of Enwonwu who by the 1950s had outgrown the relative naivety of his period under Murray, as well as in Murray's

own vision, is a certain connection between early stages of cultural self-definition, and naivism. There is a tendency at such a stage to locate cultural identity at a rather superficial level, which, on one hand, is easily within reach of the nostalgic passion, and which, on the other, is all such highly emotional moments are capable of. The displacement of rigorous logic by sentiment, which nostalgia or cultural nationalism induces, prevents a proper analysis and understanding of the complexity which defines cultural identity. One sees this even in the rhetoric of Negritude and the superficiality of its understanding of culture. This partly explains both the nature of works from the Nostalgia period and their affinity with naivism, the other explanation being that on the other side of naivism, to the young and as yet unscrupulous exile mind, stands Western classicism, and to elect the former is to oppose the latter.

It makes sense here to recall the close relationship between Picasso and the master of modern Western naivism, Le Douanier Henri Rousseau, who is reputed to have told Picasso, "You and I are the greatest painters of our time",[51] and in whose honour the younger artist organized a legendary banquet in his studio in 1908. For the avant-garde of modernism, Rousseau's paintings signified the ultimate subversion of the academy, and in that sense stood for the avant-garde's own departure from that tradition.

It may then be argued that on a conscious level the naivism of the Nostalgia period in Egonu's work, that disregard for "aesthetics", is a justifiable countering of academicism and thus of the Western tradition. Gradually, as the artist moved deeper into his own space and sought to understand it better, this element would transform, retaining this level of rawness only in the series of book illustrations he executed in

the early 1970s.

The late Nostalgia period is characterised by a logical relocation of the tropes of cultural difference. Scenes of childhood and genre are replaced with cultural symbols, what the artist describes as "metaphors",[52] especially masks. This new introduction began with "African Masks" (1963) in which he sets masks against the background of huts and homesteads. The design sensibility exhibits a more marked progression away from the early stages of the phase, with greater boldness, carefreeness, and looseness. Dimension, perspective, and modelling are almost completely done away with. Form is represented by positive shape, crudely blocked in. The masks, one of them an allusion to a Bini ivory mask, are stained in with a number of arbitrary patches of colour registered specifically as colour and not as form or object. Form is only suggested, through a few definitive lines and darker stains on one of the masks which, in fact, is a head with a skull cap rather than a mask. Atmosphere is decidedly submitted to design and instinct. Thick, scruffy lines define the profiles and contours of the elements.

Closely scrutinised, this painting and subsequent ones from the period, yield a different and very interesting line on the manner of palette choice. First, the size of palette is minimalised to the very basic, even the archaic, defined by a broad symbolic essence. Here there are three basic colours: blue, yellow, and rock burnt sienna, all of which are related to the specific environment they evoke, but more importantly belong to the palette of Igbo wall painters[53] It is interesting that the same approach to choice of colours can also be seen in the 1963 "Boy with a Budgerigar" and "Boy eating Sweetcorn".

In "Still Life with Mask in Landscape" (1963) the sense of arbitrary design

recurs and the objects are chosen without regard for formalistic homogeneity. The treatment is spontaneous and there is no intent for verisimilitude. The central and unifying element here is the provenance of the objects, the reference - real and stretched - to the artist's Igbo origins. Each object is chosen as an allusive sign, a representative motif for events and patterns in his culture, each deposited in place of a whole corpus of anecdotes, rituals, and contexts. And yet, these are presented under titles that allude not that culture but to the artist's immediate environment and experience in the Western tradition; a sort of merger with the evoked cultural heritage as the core and the Western element signified in the title as the frame, the 'take-away' wrap.

There is also another related connection which the artist points out in his interview with Streicher in 1965. According to him, not only did he choose the mask in this series as a "symbol of the African past" and an inseparable part of African art, but also because he was "thinking of the influence of African masks had on European modern art, especially on Cubism".[54] This seems to corroborate the point we made earlier about the effects of the artist's exposure to the art of all cultures and the heightening of his critical awareness, his self-assessment and affirmation in the presence of others. It is also clear from this that his awareness of art and eclecticism was a conscious one which emboldened him to experiment even as he withdrew into what he perceived to be the space of his heritage. By approaching Western modernism as only an offshoot of this heritage and locating it within his space rather than seeing himself as operating within its space, he had already justified whatever elements of eclecticism may be found in his own work. Self definition had moved from the extremist and naive to the affirmative, from the sentimental to the

intellectual.

Egonu has described the late Nostalgia period as his "window" period.[55] Although what follows this statement is a loose and hardly articulate explanation of periods rather than information on the specific phase, the late Nostalgia period was one of an opening up of vision for him, one during which he began to see through the dimness of his search for an aesthetic persona. As we have already said, the search became more assured because its confines were clearer, and these confines rather than impose restraint legitimised and encouraged experimentation and exploration. As soon as it was established that the definition of self was not a question of locating the African opposite the Western and pitching one against the other, but one of recognising the common roots of 20th century art and reclaiming these roots without parochialism, the window was open and vision clearer.

THE BRIDGE

"Still Life with Mask" leads to "Mask with Musical Instruments", the last in the series and landmark at the end of the Nostalgia period. The artist identifies it as one of the "bridges" in his development, one that served him "not only for crossing in order to explore, but also as a basis for experiment".[56] According to him, it led him over into the group of works he did in 1964 which belong to another phase. In purely technical terms, the painting does not differ from the previous ones in the series. The minimalism of palette in "Still Life with Mask" is also observed, as the specific palette of pale blue, yellow, burnt sienna and black. It is however more striking in its fauvist accent as well as the treatment of space. On the right hand corner the landscape is

rotated 90 degrees so it stands on its side. The immediate background in what is in fact a flat plane, is worked into grids to echo the body work of a thumb piano on the top right corner. The mask is a deliberate cross between the ugly and the beautiful, perhaps copied from a photograph but completely reinterpreted, its form reduced to cones and suggestions of planes. The mask is garish, yet it seems to be smiling.

About the other works on masks Egonu has said that his interest was to observe that the countenance of every mask in African art is deliberate and symbolic, not just a show of Beauty and the Beast.[57] As we saw in chapter three, as a little boy borne on his father's shoulders to masking events, he was intrigued by their "aesthetic" diversity, in other words the variety from the very ugly to the very beautiful. His first art teacher had also taught him the mystery of this aesthetic inconsistency which lay in the use and symbolism of the individual masks. Crossing the ugly and the beautiful in "Mask with Musical Instruments" was still part of that definitive subversion of academicist aesthetics which opposes the Beautiful and the Ugly and places Beauty as a condition of art. Egonu was reasserting the validity of locating both the Beautiful and the Ugly within the space of the aesthetic, and thus seemingly disqualifying Beauty as a condition of art.

If Beauty is removed as the condition of the aesthetic, the later is effectively redefined, and in this redefinition personalised. Within the individual aesthetic which this process outlines, there is then greater room for experimentation and exploration since the essence is no longer Beauty as defined by form. Having disqualified a particular condition, there is also the challenge of reforming the conditions of this individual aesthetic.

Although the artist saw things in broad, continental or 'African' terms at this

stage and has continued to do so, what he did was to use that which he perceived as African to define his own personality and create room for the development of his own aesthetic. His interpretations of the "African" form which masks represented and which the mask in this particularly painting sought to appropriate also provided him with the basic philosophical principles which would underlie his art subsequently. According to him, the forms of masks revealed to him what he calls their "artistic beauty". The crucial sign here is the distinction between Beauty and "artistic beauty". The "artistic beauty" of a scary and ugly mask, in conventional terms, implies the possibility of beauty outside the visually perceptible.

Yet the artist locates this "beauty" within the form. There are two possibilities here. One is that an entity which may be described as ugly can possess a "beautiful" form, form which is beautiful not in its ability to induce overall appeal as object, but in the arrangement of its parts, the logical suasion of its components. In a sense then, it seems, rather than what we implied earlier on, rather than totally disqualify beauty as a condition or character of the aesthetic, what the artist does is to redefine it, to relocate its qualifiers and reformulate its implications. Beauty here is not in the object of itself and as identified, but in its design. This priorisation of design we will discover in many of his works even later in his career.

This of course is in line with formalist aesthetics and the artist is known to have expressed like interpretation of form and beauty. Part of his research has included the use and break down of form in African sculpture, especially in Nok terra cotta sculpture. In an unpublished and undated essay titled "The Reproductions of Nok Culture Terracottas Showing: Spherical shape, Cylindrical Shape, & Conical shape," he extols the formalistic sensibility of the Nok, their ability to break down

forms in nature into shapes and geometrical units and eventually synthesise these back into a resolved whole. For him "the Creators of these works were keen observers of Nature, and very much influenced by her." But there is little evidence that he had accepted such a concept of form during the late Nostalgia period or at the time of his "bridge" in 1963. By his own admission referred to earlier on, he had little regard for aesthetics or the achievement of the Beautiful whether in form or in its realisation during this period. The 1965 reference to the beauty of form, therefore, appears retrospective. Undoubtably, by 1965 his knowledge of Nok and the use of form in sculpture was already evident in his work as we shall see subsequently, but prior to the "cross-over" from 1963 to 1964, his perception of the complexities of form was not such as to justify a strictly formalist interpretation of this reference to form and its beauty.

The other possibility is that what he found in form at this stage was its potentials for deformation and reinterpretation without reference to the original, the opportunities for redefinition of objectivity which form offers. What one sees in the mask series is an exploration of form as a guide, form as a launch-pad for the exploration of shape, colour, line, the beauty of transformed form as we see in the representation of the masks. There are other possibilities which we shall see shortly but which are not evident from these works and would appear subsequently.

Another philosophical principle divined at this stage was that of the connection of art to religion. The artist perceived masks as essentially religious images, and as an "inseparable part" of African art, masks also signified to him the centrality of religion to African art. Thus in the Streicher conversation he asserts that "religious images are the base of African Culture".[58] It may be observed that such ideas were

rather popular at the time, as they have indeed continued to be so at least in the West. What is important to us is not whether his perception of the bases of African culture was essentially correct and well-informed or whether it was influenced by the popular ideas of the day. What is crucial is that the centrality of the religious element was at this time imputed into the artist's personal aesthetic and would produce a whole series of work in the early 1970s as we shall see later.

The third principle was that of the historicity of art. In the masks the artist saw, according to him, a "strong link with the African past".[59] As we observed earlier, the location of his cultural identity moved from nostalgic recollections of childhood to specific signifiers of the past, and in the mask he saw a quintessential form which represented that past. Beyond representing a stage in the individual memory, the mask also signified whatever history or culture it came from. Form, art, acts as carrier for history. Thus the aesthetic was not simply beautiful by the visual appeal of form but also reliquary for moments in the individual or group epic. Beauty does not reside in, or is not entirely appropriated by the visual attributes of form. And if we should return to our earlier conclusion, if beauty signifies only the physical, visual attributes of form, then it is not a sufficient condition of the aesthetic. The artist effectively identifies the conditions of art within his understanding, in other words he outlines the conditions of his aesthetic which go beyond beauty as the visual and sensual appeal of form.

With this, it could be said that at the end of the Nostalgia period the artist had a fair idea of the space of his aesthetic possibilities and was ready to work within it to exhume those possibilities. The task no longer was to discover the self but to explore it.

AFTER THE BRIDGE

Clearly, Egonu's understanding of the aesthetic deepened as he crossed his 'bridge' into 1964. A number of significant formalistic and thematic additions become noticeable. First, he introduced into his repertoire of "metaphors" purely motival forms without reference to specific objects. The metaphorical allusions to his background further shifted from the initial genre and the subsequent paraphernalic to the pure sign, the decorative motif. In moving to the sign he had also advanced the process of his own abstraction of the self, the process of transition from nostalgia to clear self-definition we mentioned above. He and his perceived culture were no longer represented in recollections of childhood or the naive village scene, or in the enactive icon of the mask, but in decorative designs which could be identified specifically with that background. The self had moved from the object to the sign, from the gross to essence.

Also, and this is important, it was not merely the specific motifs that defined this shift but the identification of motival abstraction of reality as a central distinguishing element of the culture or cultures which the artist elected to locate his identity within. In other words it was not particular motifs that mattered but the use and presence of motifs. The artist could lift these from sources or create them himself, and in doing so see himself as working within a tradition, one with which he identifies. And whatever else he chooses to reflect in his work, this element serves as a frame of reference.

In a conversation in 1989,[60] Egonu noted that during this period he was still searching for sources and markers which would guide him in creating a personal

language for expressing his vision, and that he felt African cultures are "as rich and engaging as any other" to serve this purpose. He made reference to Gauguin and the fact that in all his adventures in the South Seas and his rebellion, he never completely rejected the academy and its canons: easel painting, definitions of the picture plane, prevailing patterns of patronage and thematic preoccupation, materials and techniques. In all of these the Western tradition remained still his frame of reference. For Egonu it was only proper that an African artist who chooses to be so identified, while taking in elements from the Western art tradition, should define himself and his art as essentially African by divining principles peculiar to his origins. In his case he identified the employment of motival elements as part of these definitive principles. We shall be looking at some implications of these principles and how they do indeed locate art forms within certain social and cultural provenances.

The level of development in this aesthetic direction is most striking when we compare two paintings of the same subject: the 1958 "Still life with melon and pineapple" and its repeat in 1964. While the 1958 oil is a conventional still life painting in the naturalistic tradition, complete with divisions of dimension and depth, perspective and strict observation of the rules of chiaroscuro and colour harmony in green and red, a faultless segmentation of the picture frame into golden sections, each object avoiding the bull's eye, the diagonals carefully arranged and echoed, the 1964 painting is remarkably different. Although the size of the palette does not change much, its nature and relationship to the objects does so quite significantly. While in the 1958 painting the local colour of green is dominant, naturally complimented with red in the table cloth and the yellow and ochre of the pineapple, the colours in the 1964 work have absolutely nothing to do with local colour or objectivity, what, to

remain on the safe side, we must begin to see as superficial objectivity. The centre of the fruits is painted in sienna and the body in black, the flesh in ochre. The determinant here is not objective reality but the mood of the moment. The palette is carried over from the mask series of the late Nostalgia period.

More remarkable is how the objects are embedded in the general pattern of what is basically a complex of decorative patterns in sienna, black and ochre, very reminiscent of textiles. The focus is no longer the still life but its possibilities within a broader frame. There is no intent to appeal through mimesis, or to recall any memories. The immediate is the point, and the immediate belongs to the artist to define, and not to the object. Reality is abstracted into a pattern with its own appeal and significance, much as there still remains a visual reference to it. What is symbolised here is not clear, but the essence is not so much in what is symbolised as it is in reclaiming the aesthetic and interpretative imperative so as to, in way, resubjectivise it.

Despite the allusion to textiles, no particular pattern or motif can be specifically provenanced here. Yet there is a feel which is removed, if not entirely from prevailing Western modernist style since both Miro and at this time Stuart Davis in America were both alluding to textile design and wrapping decoration, at least extremely from the academy. And since, as we have said, the artist already located Western modernism within the "African" space which he was reclaiming, it can be argued that this feel was at least non-Western without falling into the trap of generalisations over what is African and what is not. To the artist, his new introductions were identifiably African.

Another shift in his use and interpretation of form and identity was indeed an

advancement in the preeminence of line which began in the late Nostalgia period. While line up till 1963 was still crude and tentative, more an evidence of rebellious arbitrariness and bravado, it took on an assured nature from 1964, introduced specifically both to define form and to stand as form, to constitute, define, and emphasise design. Line is carefully introduced, thick and rough as it is, laid down in determined paths that interweave more to create pattern than to define shapes. Each element becomes as important as any other: line, colour, shape.

In the same 'Still life with melon and pineapple' of 1964 it is indeed line that predominates. All forms are interpreted in the shape of lines, subordinated to and subsumed in it. Even the shapes are only variations on the shape of line, thick stretches of line made to meet and thus assume the configuration of shape. In 'Northern Nigerian Landscape', one of the transitional works from the period in which the artist makes both imagistic and formalistic allusion to his country but which, strictly speaking, does not fall into the Nostalgia period either chronologically or thematically since the artist has no direct experience of Northern Nigeria, there is a repetition of elements from the still life. The palette is the same though there is an obvious closer relationship between the colours and the subject. The relationship, however, is only with the subject and not individual objects in the picture. The architecture in the landscape is plain and largely uniform, defined by apertures which in fact equally do not necessarily reflect the objective reality of the atmosphere in question. The dominant elements are line and pattern. In the middle right side a section of patterns occurs which seems to have been lifted straight from the still life where it represented a pineapple, into this picture where it becomes vegetation. What in the left side appears like a road is equally a tree with bare branches. Each element

invokes and reinforces ambiguity, thus subverting the tendency towards straight interpretation. The whole image, the feel or atmosphere, is the object, not the parts, although the artist takes time to section the whole into parts. Depth is entirely banished. So indeed is flatness since each element is invested with the possibility of depth. The essence is not merely to remove distance but to de-emphasise it, to unseat it. As in the still life, line again assumes centrality, holding the magic of de-formation and re-interpretation. The key is the bold line, the scrawled line.

And so, without any lengthy philosophical reveries in the manner of Klee, the artist restores line to prominence. Our reference to Klee here is indeed relevant in that his concept of the preeminence of line was in the first place inspired by his exposure to African sculpture. In other words it could be said that both artists had found in the art of African cultures an element which, to them, defined and distinguished it and deserved prominence in their individual aesthetics.

The other notable principle is texture. Besides the texturality suggested by patterning, there is a deliberate effort to infuse a feel of tactility into the elements through either stippling or the crude scrawl of the lines. In 'Northern Nigerian Landscape' the road/path/form is stippled to create a false texturality and volume. In 'Man with Pipe' this is more prominent. While this texture evokes volume and depth, as we have said, line counters any such reference. All other identifiable evocations of objective reality are effectively subverted by reducing them to plain geometric shapes.

By the next year Egonu had reached considerable maturity in his search. 'Woman before a mirror' (1965) combines all these elements. Its greater significance lies in the fact that it embodies a resolution of the artist's aesthetic and philosophical

conflicts: his identification with elements and symbols from African cultures, and his willingness to absorb influences and inspiration from anywhere including the Western tradition he worked all these years to subvert. 'Woman before a mirror' alludes to Degas thematically, according to the artist.[61] But the theme is interpreted individually and entirely differently. The object is identifiable here, but it is only part of the pattern. Texture, design, line, form are the subjects, and not the human figure. But more important is the point that the African artist who so designates himself can indeed reinterpret work by a European artist, take on the same theme which ordinarily might not be directly located within his own space, and still retain his identity. In effect, this identity is not defined by thematic sources. Rather, it inscribes and transcends them. What defines it does not become clearer, even as it retains its great importance to the artist, but we at least know what it excludes.

'Woman', among other works, represents the selective eclecticism that remains a central part of Egonu's work and effectively resolves his place as an outsider artist in Europe digesting his environment and reinterpreting his world in his own language. The work fits our analyses and conclusions on the masquerade as the quintessential art, its receptivity to elements from outside the immediate environment or culture.

It could indeed be said that by 1965 the Egonu aesthetic was fairly clearly defined. In form it was characterised by the ambiguity of form, the preeminence of line, texture, and pattern, the employment of decorative motifs, and the ultimate subversion of objective reality to relocate the essence of the artistic, free the creative imagination, and repossess the aesthetic imperative. With time mastery of these features naturally improved. From 1966 the abolition of real distance which began in

the late Nostalgia period advanced to the redefinition of the viewpoint. The cyclic and bird's eye views took over the conventional plane, especially in the *Protection* series and maturing in 'Exodus' in 1970. By the 1970s the austere palette of the sixties had loosened and the decorative was no longer configured in line and pattern but also in colour, especially in the prints. The contrapuntal juxtaposition of positive and negative space which we see most remarkably for the first time in 'Woman before a mirror' in 1965, becomes a trademark of the Egonu picture, delicately balancing the occupied and the fallow.

All of these can be located in the art traditions of African cultures, most of them in the art of the artist's Igbo group. In other words, a strong relationship could be established between the formalistic manifests of the Egonu aesthetic and not only the art of the artist's origins, but also several aspects of the life and culture of the Igbo.

The pre-eminence of line could be found in Igbo mural painting and in the carved doors of the Awka, some of which Egonu was familiar with as a little boy in Onitsha. Line, in Igbo art, is not only a graphic element but a sign which links art to the pattern of existence. The thick border line which segments and divides the picture and outlines shape derives from the place of borders among a sedentary people. The Igbo are reputed to have the highest population density in Africa. For an essentially agricultural people, land is sacred. In this case it becomes even more important because it is scarce. So that not only is it worshipped, it is also carefully divided and cultivated.[62] Borders are reinforced and strictly adhered to. People exist and operate within borders, each man within the confines of his own space. As the painter Obiora Udechukwu noted in a conversation in 1990,[63] the Igbo insist that the man who walks

within his own borders does not harm the yam in another's plot. In his foreword to *Igbo Arts: Community and Cosmos*[64] Achebe brings to mind a popular verbal formulation of this idea of fragmentation and defined borders: the public exultation *Onye na nkie, onye na nkie,* which, though he translates it as "everyone *and* his own," actually stands for "everyone *in* his own place", the word na being both a preposition and a conjunction. In both translations the concept of separate portions is reinforced, and that of trespass underlined. It can indeed be observed even in an era of growing industrialisation and urbanisation how, among the Igbo, individuals spend more money erecting reinforced walls around their properties than they spend developing them. Fallow land hedged in by high concrete walls is a common sight, and in the late eighties and the nineties there is growing art of decorated, sculptured walls around private dwellings. The reinforcement of borders remains a living part of the Igbo sensibility.

This is equally projected in the Igbo concept of uncompromising individualism within a principally communal existence. Achebe makes reference to the Igbo verbal coda which insists that while two people may come of the same mother, no two people are created by the same chi. According to him, "this is individualism taken to its utmost".[65] Not only does each man, each family, hold inviolable right to a portion which must not be trespassed, each individual equally holds title to a separate identity which is clearly marked and walled and cannot be compromised. The line between defines this individualism. It is interesting that the English saying that 'drop by drop makes an ocean' has no direct equivalent in Igbo, not because the ocean is not an immediate experience but because the idea of absolute mingling and loss of the separate portion and identity is disagreeable.

It is this preeminence of the borderline, the thick and insistent line, which is projected in the art. In fact the place of the line in graphic art differs from among the rain forest Igbo with a higher demographic density and greater attachment to the land to the North-eastern Igbo with a sparse population and poor, savanna vegetation. The line thickens in the Mbari mural painting of the Southern Igbo which is strictly patterned and structural, while it thins and floats in the *uli* paintings of the central and Northern Igbo where there are more open borders.

The line has yet another prominent significance in the Igbo world, the line as a route, channel, road. First, Achebe identifies the concept of channels of power or energy, borne in the expression, *Ike di na awaja na awaja*, power/energy runs in channels.[66] As he rightly notes, "energy is the essence of all things human, spiritual, animate, and inanimate." The universe is thus constituted of lines of energy. Line is the space and location of energy and essence, not shape. Reality is not suffused in patches of energy but striated and traversed by essence in lines. Above shape or area, then, is line, the path of power.

Second, the Igbo priorise the Road or path as the channel of other principles less abstract as energy.[67] Communication between the different 'worlds' or layers of cosmological configuration is conducted along routes. The dead and the unborn need paths between them and the living, and these thoroughfares are crucial for balance and peace. It would not be overstretching our references to Achebe to cite yet another articulation of this principle from his work since the novelist demonstrates unrivalled understanding of the Igbo world. In one of his earliest stories,[68] a young and overzealous village head teacher instructs his pupils to landscape a portion of the school property, in the process covering up an ancient path which, according the

villagers, is used by spirits. Soon after this, strange happenings begin to occur in the village and there is anxiety since it is feared the dead would be held up on their way out and women would no longer conceive since the unborn cannot make their entry. Such is the strength of the belief that when the Christian head teacher refuses to re-open the path, forces in the village take matters into their hands and in the cover of darkness ruin the entire landscape.

The line, the road, is not only crucial for necessary communication between symbiotic layers of reality, it is also a symbol of opportunity and endless possibilities, a prerequisite for the mobility which human beings crave in order to fully act out their destinies. This concept is borne in a common formulation, E liwe uzo, liwe ehi, m aghara uzo toro ehi: ehi wu anu e riwe e riche ye, uzo wu a gawa a gacha agacha, "if a cow and a road are tethered and I am called upon to choose, I would pick the road, for the meat of a cow finishes; the road has no end." The concept of the endless Road embodies the extremism of Igbo optimism, the idea that there is no limit to individual achievement and mobility as long as there is a thoroughfare. The thoroughfare here would signify fate, the path of destiny and social mobility which opens up to the adventurist and daring and guarantees success and progress to the hard-working. With the road the lowliest have the opportunity to reach the heights of nobility. The line or track, the road, is thus not only the path of energy but also of destiny, the two most important complementary principles in the Igbo world. These seem to explain the preeminence of line in Igbo art, both graphic and sculptural. It should be noted that Awka carved doors exhibit a profusion of lines which totally displaces imagistic form and allusions. And it is to this centrality in the Igbo sensibility that line in Egonu's work may be related.

The use of space and balance of positive and negative shapes which we see first in 'Northern Nigerian Landscape' and 'Woman before a mirror' and which would characterise much of Egonu's work in the seventies and the eighties especially the prints such as 'A Cup of Coffee in Solitude' and 'Lone Eater', can also be located in much Igbo art and the organisation of Igbo life and society. The tight structurality of Southern Igbo painting with little negative space and close knit patterning relates directly to village planning, organisation, and architecture, as well as the social and political structures which de-emphasise disparate hierarchies. The complex structure of family and lineage units coming together in the village group with power evenly distributed among the units, what has come to be known as Igbo republicanism and which is strongest in this part of the Igbo area, is projected in both the dwelling pattern and the graphic arts. Among the central Igbo where there are monarchical traditions either surviving or in antiquity, rigid structurality in graphic design gives way to patterns of positive-negative dichotomy. Areas of emphasis are countered by open ones. The negative space is as important as the positive area of emphasis, and the picture plane can contain only a limited number of elements to maintain this balance between negative and positive, between the powerful upper classes of King, men of title and priests, and the negative, lower castes since, even within such hierarchical arrangements, the Igbo still insist that the individual is his own ultimate monarch and, irrespective of his position on the socio-political strata, must be accorded both visual and symbolic recognition. This balance between the noble and the plebeian, so to speak, is necessary for the survival of the group.[69] The parity of negative and positive which we see in Egonu's work from 1965 could be related to the social structures of his origins in Onitsha and Osomari, the major monarchical

areas of Igbo land.

On the other hand, it could be related to the parity between the open space or fallow land and the inhabited space in Igbo land, both in physical and symbolic terms. For one the inhabited space is for the living while the uninhabited, is for spirits and the wild, both potent and dangerous. While the homestead is space for safety and survival, the open is precarious and threatening. Yet, for a sedentary people it is the source of living and sustenance, one that must be confronted and engaged daily and endlessly, appeased and solicited. There is a situation of permanent tension between the spaces on which the life and well-being of the community rests. Not only must both the open and the occupied spaces be attended to, there must also be a healthy relationship between them, for the safety of humans depends as much on their own actions as on the whims of inhabitants of the spirit world who occupy the open spaces and act in invisibility. Just as the relationship between humans and spirits must be one of mutual sustenance, a symbiosis,[70] so must that between the different spaces they occupy and govern.

Also, while the centre of the family unit is in the homestead, it is usually in the central and open space that the group comes together, in the uninhabited arena where the symbols of group unity like the communal shrine and the men's house are located. While each family may propitiate its own ancestors at the family shrine, the collectivity of ancestors can only be attended to in the centre, the open space which is not only the geographical foci of the village group but also the political and spiritual nerve centre.[71] It is noteworthy that even when Christianity came, believers were given portions in the centre for their new shrines. According to Cole and Aniakor, "whatever the local traditions, a village centre is spatially and ideologically

dominant"[72]. The situation is actually not so much one of a dominating as of a significant and ideologically indispensable centre. The centre, which is the most important open space, is the cohesive element which houses and signifies the unity of the group, especially among the non-monarchical Igbo where there are no unifying figure-heads.

These spaces must not only be venerated, then, they must also not be infringed upon or crowded. This is the relationship which emerges when the uli painter refuses to introduce an additional motif into a drawing or painting because it is already "saturated" even as open, negative spaces abound.[73]

In Egonu's work, beginning with "Northern Nigerian Landscape" and the 1965 works, and most pronounced in the "War and Peace" series and in the prints of the seventies and eighties, one notices a parity of the negative and positive spaces which is not dimensional but symbolic, and which parallels the Igbo painter's treatment of space and the parity in Igbo spacial sensibility. In "Gramophone" (1980), for instance, the negative space is clearly the spatial centre of the composition, providing room for the location of the subject. This is entirely a formalistic arrangement, yet it is agreeably unconventional by western canons of composition. The subject occupies the damnable bull's eye position, even as an ingenious shift in perspective places the central line both ways between the body of the gramophone and its funnel, thus strategically displacing it from the centre while at the same time keeping it there. In a number of other works, the parity of spaces is more than just formalistic, and does indeed parallel the spatial symbolism we have outlined here. One sees a well-thought out principle of spatial symbolism which could be interpreted as superseding the mere formalistic principles of western modernism. But this we will return to when

we look at the works in detail in subsequent chapters.

The principles of dualism and complementarism, the belief that nothing is complete of itself and all existence manifest in pairs so that whatever exists, exists alongside another, underlie Igbo life and philosophy. And it is these principles that manifest the above concept of spatial relationship. Cole and Aniakor have identified in the Igbo world such dualities as of the human and spirit worlds, the male and the female, the white and the black, what they call a "complementarity" which, according to them, is the underlying "visual structural principle of much Igbo masking", for instance. The principle that "wherever one thing stands, another will stand by it",[74] translated in visual terms, requires that the positive be complemented by the negative, that the black have a white by it, that a fine line is counterpoised by a thick one or by a shape. This is the principle behind the contrapuntal placement of elements in much Igbo design including both the visual structure of masks and their ideological dispositions.

We see this in both Egonu's use of space and the distribution of elements in his design. From the moment he began to employ decorative motifs in his compositions, they were always used with a sense of order rather than complete randomness. While the specific motifs may indeed be randomly chosen, without necessary symbolic significance, their distribution is governed by a tight system of balance and counterpoise. Colour areas and specific notations are equally consciously distributed. One may reduce this to just the technical requirements of compositional harmony, but on one hand, since it has become increasingly difficult to decide what is visually harmonious and how this is attained, so that it would be dangerous even to claim that these works do possess visual harmony. On the other, where this is

hazarded, it indeed returns us to the ability of the Igbo to relate visual harmony to social and cosmic harmony, recreate the latter in the former, and indeed vice versa. We may in fact note here that it is doubtful whether harmony would aptly appropriate the social and cosmic state in the Igbo world. There is a fluidity and sedate agreeability of elements implied in harmony which would be hard to locate in the Igbo world. What one sees, instead, is the tense relationship to which we referred above, which requires constant propping to preserve.

The balance is a delicate one, vulnerable to upsets at the slightest tipping, and the plurality of contradictory and opposite forces in a world peopled with malevolent spirits, portentous forces, occasionally disagreeable natural elements, and human conflicts, precludes any harmony in a conventional sense of the word. What is projected in the life and cultural products of the people, while it may be interpreted as harmony, giving our already stated uncertainty over the acceptable signification of the term, is indeed more of a balance, a delicate balance of opposites and complimenters, the contrapuntal.

Akin Euba, though writing generally about Nigerian music, which includes Igbo music, has observed that it is indeed dissonant and contains little harmony. According to him, "the few harmonies that occur from time to time are an outcome, not of a pre-conceived harmonic basis, but of contrapuntal movement, and are dissonant".[75] The music is also characterised, he observes, by what he calls " 'fragmentation' in the extreme" which, in visual terms, would be denoted in multiple segmentation and counterpointing. The pre-eminence of the contrapuntal in Igbo music is confirmed by the leading Igbo musicologist W.W. Echezona who posits that the central element of Igbo drumming is "a conflict of rhythms in a highly organized

rhythmic contrapuntal development".[76] The important point here is not only the plurality of rhythms or what has been called 'polyrhythm', but the absence of harmony which, according to him, the drummers actively subvert by avoiding the basic rhythm. Each rhythm line is pitched against the other to draw it out, drawing from and underlying the individualism within community which we referred to earlier on. A level of non-uniformity substitutes and counters the conformity which communal existence demands. The result is balance, and not wholesome harmony. This may be observed in Egonu's replication of design elements in an essentially contrapuntal manner and not necessarily for reasons of visual harmony. The elements are not meant to flow into each other or produce rhythmic fluidity but to exist each by itself while checking and at the same time complementing each another.

Beier has interpreted the contrapuntal in Igbo philosophy as evidence of a belief in "the possibility of simultaneous truth" and Achebe notes that beyond this, it also implies a concept of "*movement* in the metaphysical sense! We are not fixed in a particular idea of truth".[77] In another context, Enekwe has related this to what he calls the "dynamism of context" in Igbo theatre.[78] In most Igbo theatre, which is usually outdoors and in the round, almost every element is in constant dual tension and flux. The stage shifts just as the 'actors' do. The audience acts as a counterpoint and occasionally the stage relocates and inscribes the audience, transforming it into the centre. Focus moves from portion to portion, from one section to the opposite. If we should follow up Achebe's theory of metaphysical mobility, we find that not only is simultaneity implied in this equality of counterpoints, so is the opportunity of shifts between positions, between truths, as well as a progressive dynamism within which truth metamorphoses and what is held today is abandoned tomorrow. There

are no absolutes. As he concludes, "I am sure that 'I am the way, the truth, and the life' must have struck the first Igbo people as heresy".[79]

What we have seen above the Igbo critic Donatus Nwoga has summarised as the aesthetic of "texturalism", the syncopated and contrapuntal juxtaposition of clearly defined fragments, held in delicate balance and resting on what might be called the hanging note, symbolising on one level the balance of acute individualism with republican communalism, and on another the duality of reality, the plurality of phenomena in nature, and the absence of dominating absolutes.

This returns us to the masquerade theory. In the preceding pages we have outlined not only the nature of form in Egonu's work, we have also tried to relate this to his origins. Form here has been presented as a projection of not only physical reality but also of metaphysical and purely social structures. In the configuration of form we have observed a certain level of mimesis, a systemic rather than objective mimesis. Whether this mimesis is conscious or subconscious, issuing perhaps from the collective sensibility of the artist's background, we are not inclined to speculate upon here, beyond identifying a system of patterns and structures which we have ventured to term sensibility. Although we have looked at form as graphic rather than material, meaning form in its structures rather in its constitutive ingredient, we are able, albeit without avoiding entirely the realm of speculation, to erect inductions sufficient to define an aesthetic within any number of frames or paradigms. If we should consider form by and within itself, it is sensible to try to deduce in Egonu's work a semiotic aesthetic in the Langer sense of that which formulates the structure of feeling, feeling being not entirely subjective but also projectively objective, communal by inference. Because elements of physical experience are discernible,

experience constituting both the subjective and the extrinsic and being thus inherently social, the immanent structure is social and thus assumes objectivity.

It is also sensible to approach the works as abstractive deductions of essentially social and cosmological structures through the mimetic dimension, through the replication of objective reality by first replicating abstractions of that reality. Thus the connection to reality can be seen as indirect since a mediative element in the form of an art tradition exists between it and the reality the structure of which it eventually replicates, the mediative element having already abstracted that reality. Egonu's works could thus be seen as translations, as a system or doxa which derives from or is the result of the refractive act of another, original language.

Indeed, in the light of this proposed mimetic dimension, the works could be approached within a psychological paradigm, as representative of a specific, identifiable, group psychology. By reinforcing the discernible formalistic links between Egonu's work, the art of the Igbo, and the details of his childhood in Igboland, we might see in his work a case for the study of the psychology of Igbo art, or indeed Igbo art in transition. Like a masquerading act, form in Egonu lends itself to multiple perspectives. Yet form and the structure of form are only an aspect of the Egonu aesthetic.

The artist himself defines the totality of this aesthetic and the place of form in it when, in the 1970 essay "On Myself and my work" he states:

> My aim was to utilize the decorative symbols, which I was used to as a child in Igbo-land, to express myself and to communicate my thoughts to others.[80]

Three pointers stand out here which locate the different aspects of the Egonu aesthetic and define them. The first is the nature of form, his choice of the specificities

of form, or his individualist definition of form.

The second is the source of form, the artist's direct connection of the nature of his form to his backgrounds. Related to this is the question of the manner of appropriation of this specificity of form, which, despite identifying here correlations between his form and the sources he ascribes them to, we have not specifically attempted to establish in detail. How the artist derived his form, as distinct from where, the method of assimilation and insimilation, as opposed to provenance, remains a distinct subject to be addressed.

The third and perhaps most important pointer is the essence of form which, if we should analyze the artist's statement, in turn defines both the nature of form, and its provenance. This third aspect, which the artist specifies in the words "to express myself and to communicate my thoughts to others" we may construe with a level of accuracy as Vision. Indeed, earlier in the essay referred to above in question he writes about his "mood and vision" and later he relates this "mood" to the object of what he calls "artistic expression".

The next question is that of the accurate nature of the relationship between this "artistic expression" which translates vision, and form. While it is clear that in the artist's own formulation, the essence of form is to bear his vision, the space which this relationship creates bears many possibilities. The first is one of a unity of form and vision, in which vision is conveyed through independent form, through form as *autonome*, a case of form as vision. This way vision is contained within the structures and presence of form, and form alone defines it, without alluding to any other reality beyond or outside of itself.

This, of course, is essentially a formalistic definition of the relationship of form

and vision. However, extreme formalism and autonomysm as in Greenbergian Modernism would hardly fit the relationship one discerns in Egonu's work since, within the paradigms of autonomysm, vision whithers away, ideally setting form free. It is clear from Egonu's statement above that he places a qualifier on the autonomy of form.

A closer formalist paradigm would be that of Marcuse in which form does not entirely appropriate vision but expresses it through itself. Marcuse's essentially reformist Marxist aesthetic sets form within a necessarily social-functionalist frame whereby it is not so much an end in itself, as in Greenbergian autonomysm, but the means to an end, a vision, which is to rearrange, and thus subvert, the structure of given reality.[81]

The hub of this theory of form is that form fulfils its role and translates a vision because, in its very essence, it subverts reality, and presents an alternative. Its "revolutionary essence" and the definition of vision is not in the nature of the alternative reality which it presents, but in the act of formulation and presentation of this reality. In other words vision is still contained entirely within form, indeed in a manner which is ultimately no more revolutionary than that which insists on its absence. In Marcuse's theory all art is visionary because it is the nature of art to reconstruct reality, and this is both the essence of art and its vision. In opposing the "pure form" theory of Greenberg, Marcuse writes:

> A work of art is authentic or true not by virtue of its content...nor by its "pure" form, but by the content having become form.[82]

Form, the dialectical alter-reality is, after all, the vision.

However, form in the Egonu aesthetic seems distinct from either of the possibilities outlined above. He takes time to specify that the essence of his

explorations is "to use form, to subordinate it to my will, in order to use it to express myself". Form is subject, after all, not free of and by itself. One distinction between this qualification and Marcuse's is that in the Marcuse, formalist theory the essence of form is the creation of form itself, while in the Egonu aesthetic the essence of form is for it to be used. There is an extension beyond form, and its ancillary status is further emphasised when the artist states that his intention is to "subordinate it to my will". The will supercedes the form, form is only a tool, a means.

Here vision is independent of form even as it is borne by it. Contrary to Marcuse's insistence, we are taken beyond "pure form", and the act of content becoming form, to the "virtues of content", content being the expression of self and thought which Egonu defines as the essence of form in his art. Having located it, we see therefore that form is only a subordinate part of a larger aesthetic which revolves around such signifiers as "mood", "feeling", "self-expression", and "vision". For as long as we are able to locate these beyond form as an end, for as long as these cannot be fulfilled or realised simply by the process of creating or realising form, as the artist insists, it is logical to seek them in that which form serves and manifests, that which it contains besides itself.

Content beyond form is thematic. That which form manifests outside of itself is the message which it conveys. This message may then be virtuous or not; its nature is secondary to the recognition of its presence. The Egonu aesthetic may thus be defined as comprising form and that to which form gives realisation and expression, the vision which form translates. This vision is the subject, and if we should accept the artist's definition of his own aesthetic as a satisfactory preoccupation of art historical enquiry, in this case it is the subject that is at the centre of the art, and not

form. In the Egonu aesthetic, as we have seen, form defines an atemporal cultural identity which derives its pointers from a specific, collective sensibility. But, beyond this, it serves an individual vision not entirely defined by the provenance of this sensibility, a vision which overrides form. It is this vision, in its many forms and manifestations, that we intend to look at in the rest of this study.

Briefly, what has been described as The Vision of Uzo Egonu[83] is strongly defined by the signifiers noted above, namely "mood" and "feeling", each defined by the personal possessive, as observed earlier, to emphasise the essential subjectivity of the vision. In its vast breadth this vision ranges from the most intuitive and introspective to the space of public commitment, removing the artist from the realms of easy categorization. From subtle humour and sagely wit to social engagement, Egonu's vision follows his private thoughts and circumstances, his moods and dispositions, physical and emotional.

He is at once a private person and a public actor, an individual as well as a communal worker, performing within both the private and public space. In his aesthetic art is beyond the parochialisms of definitive allocation of duties. Its essence is sufficiently inscribed in the subjectivities of the artist's feelings, which is in turn shaped by experience. Given the nature of experience as essentially social even at its most private, being in the first place human and thus irretrievable from the arena of collective and cumulative social interaction, the subjectivity of feeling is thus both given and partial. It exists only in so far as the digestion of experience and the formulation of feeling are left with the individual and not dictated by the authoritarian machineries of the public arena. But the imperative of the interactive element circumscribes this subjectivity with the objectivity of experience and locates

it essentially within the social space.

The vision which the artist locates at the centre of his aesthetic is thus as private and subjective as it is 'visionary' or social, and objective, in all its manifestations. From the flower paintings to his war art, from the wit and subtle sarcasm of "Flamboyant Poet" to the melancholy of the series, *Stateless People*, the artist sustains this duality. The result is a thematic pluralism that excludes nothing from the reaches of this vision: nature, wildlife, hunger, women, the vanities and vagaries of human nature, pain, anguish, loneliness, alienation and disability, the whole range of human experience and emotions within the reaches of the individual mind and creative imagination.

In the following pages we bring some of these thematic subjects under patterns and headings for convenience and as they relate to one another. Under these headings we seek the ramifications of the artist's vision in his form and imagery, making reference to information outside the codes of form where possible and necessary. To encircle the breadth of Egonu's vision would require an exploration of the breadth of experience available to him. In the rest of the study we only seek to illustrate aspects of the various forms and manifestations, and by so doing provide a view of the mask's many faces. In the end whatever emerges must be taken as only a perspective on an act the varied manifestations and valences of which no singular view can encapsulate.

Notes

1. One recognises that 'reading' can only be a metaphor in this context, and one with limitations. Which is not to yield to the growing, exclusive assignment of the term to 'literary' text especially after Derrida.

2. In *Against Interpretation*, Sontag takes up this preoccupation with interpretation based on the presumption that there is meaning [reason for being, intent, content] at the heart of the work of art. Her position is that appreciation should preoccupy itself with description rather than transcription.

3. Cyril Barrett, ed., *Wittgenstein: Lectures and Conversations on Aesthetics, Psychology and Religious Belief* [Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1978]

4. This, of course, is equally contestible. Cf. Sontag above.

5. Richard Kostelanetz, ed., *Esthetics Contemporary* [New York: Prometheus Books, 1989].

6. (Vogel, Biebuyck, Thompson, Newman, Okeke etc)

7. Wtadystaw Tatarkiewicz, *History of Aesthetics I: Ancient Aesthetics* [Warszarwa 1970] p. 11.

8. Lord Anthony Quinton, 'Aesthetics', in Bullock and Trombley, eds., *The Fontana Dictionary of Modern Thought* [London: Fontana Press, 1988] p. 12.

9. Barrett, *Wittgenstein*, p.11.

10. Herbert Read, *The Meaning of Art* [Middlesex: Penguin Books, 1931] p. 16.

11. George Dickie, *Aesthetics: An Introduction* [Indianapolis: Pegasus, 1980]

12. Bertram Morris, *The Aesthetic Process* [New York: AMS Press1970, First published Northwestern University Press 1943]

13. Vernon Lee, *The Beautiful* [Cambridge: Cambridge University, 1913].

14. Ibid., p. 11.

15. Morris, op.cit., p. 2.

16. Ibid., p.1.

17. Stefan Morawski, *Inquiries into the Fundamentals of Aesthetics* [Massachusetts: MIT Press 1974] p. 88.

18. Cesare Poppi, 'From the Suburbs of the Global Village: Afterthoughts on *Magiciens de la terre*', *Third Text*, No. 16, Spring 1991, pp. 85-96.

19. Martin, Director of the Georges Pompidou Centre, commissioned the exhibition *Magiciens de la terre* in which Kane Kwei's coffins were displayed. Despite critical ambivalences, they feature prominently also in Vogel's Africa Explores exhibition at the Centre for African Art, New York, 1991 where they are described as "new functional art". Although Deliss's Lotte or the Transformation of the Object in which she presents an assortment of "artefacts" from West Africa alongside "works" of art from a diverse background proposes to investigate this transgressive exercise of aestheticising power, it leaves off where it begins, and does not succeed as a critique. A lack of theoretical focus defeats the stated intent and the result is very much in line with that which it sets out to pull into discourse. See *Durch* 8/9, 1990.

20. Berel Lang, *Art and Inquiry* [Detroit: Wayne State University Press 1975] pp. 169-205.

21. Ibid., p.170.

22. For a discussion with the artist on this see Peter Fuller, *Beyond the Crisis in Art* [London: Writers and Readers, 1981] pp. 110-134.

23. Any disputations of this would simply be anarchist. What transforms a Richard Long stretch of sand into art is precisely the infliction of human action upon the environment.

24. F. H. Heinemann, *Essay on the Foundations of Aesthetics: Analysis of Aesthetical Form* [Paris: Herman and Cie, 1939] p. 13.

25. Ibid., p. 171.

26. Herbert Marcuse, *The Aesthetic Dimension: Toward a Critique of Marxist Aesthetics* [London: Macmillan, 1978].

27. Ibid., p. x.

28. David Hume, *A Treatise on Human Nature*, edited with introduction by Ernest C. Mossner [Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1969] pp. 372-3

29. G. W. F. Hegel, *On Art, Religion, Philosophy*, ed. J. Glenn Grey [New York/ Evanston: Harper and Row, 1970] p. 38.

30. Morawski, op. cit., p. 136.

31. Dickie, *Aesthetics*, p. 41.

32. T. M. Green, *The Arts and the Art of Criticism* [Princeton, 1940] pp.465-470

33. Morawski, op. cit. p.155.

34. Language as a valid metaphor for all expression and not just vocal enunciation.

35. Artist's slide collection.

36. H. Streicher, 'Reflections of Uzo Egonu', unpublished interview, 1966 p. 10.

37. Uzo Egonu, 22 *Prints*, exhibition catalogue [Nsukka: Department of Fine and Applied Arts UNN, 1985] p. 3.

38. Ibid., p. 3.

39. Elizabeth Frank, *Jackson Pollock* [New York: Abeville Press, 1983] p. 31.

40. Streicher, op. cit., p. 30.

41. A. S. Huffington, *Picasso: Creator and Destroyer* [London: Pan Books Ltd, 1989]

42. Frank, op. cit., p. 31.

43. Huffington p. 61.

44. Ibid., p. 58.

45. Ibid., p. 59.

46. Streicher, 'Reflections', p. 40.

47. Ousmane Sembene declared it moribund at the Dakar Conference on French African Literature in March 1963. Other participants like Cheikh Hamidou Kane were of the same opinion. See *African Literature and the Universities*, ed. Gerald Moore [Ibadan: Ibadan University Press for The Congress for Cultural Freedom, 1965]

48. Streicher, op. cit.

49. Ibid., p. 30.

50. Interview with the artist, South Kenton, November 1989.

51. Huffington, *Picasso*, p. 100.

52. Interviews with the artist, November 1989.

53. For detail discussion of the symbolism of this palette see Obiora Udechukwu, 'Lyrical Symbolism: Notes on Traditional Wall Paintings from Agulu', BA Thesis, University of Nigeria, Nsukka, 1972.

54. Streicher, 'Reflections', pp. 8-9.

55. Ibid., p. 8.

56. Ibid., p. 11.

57. Interviews with the artist, November 1989.

58. Streicher, op. cit., p. 11.

59. Ibid., p. 11.

60. Interviews with the artist, South Kenton, October 1989.

61. Interviews, 1989.

62. G. I. Jones has tried to explain Igbo village planning in terms of Igbo agriculture and has related social structures to the ecology with respect to the Central and North-Eastern Igbo. See Jones, 'Agriculture and Ibo village planning', *Farm and Forest*, No. 6, 1945, pp. 9-15, and Jones, 'Ecology and social structure among the North Eastern Ibo', *Africa*, No. 31, 1961, pp. 117-134. See also A. E. Afigbo, 'Prolegomena to the Study of the Culture History of the Igbo-Speaking Peoples of Nigeria', F. C. Ogbalu and E. N. Emenanjo, eds., *Igbo Language and Culture* [Ibadan: Oxford University Press, 1975] pp. 41-43.

63. Interview with Obiora Udechukwu, Nsukka, 1990.

64. Chinua Achebe, Foreword to *Igbo Arts: Community and Cosmos* by Herbert M. Cole and Chike C. Aniakor [Los Angeles: Museum of Cultural History, UCLA, 1984]. Republished as 'The Igbo World and its Art' in Chinua Achebe, *Hopes and Impediments* [Heinemann International, 1988] pp. 42-45.

65. Chinua Achebe and Ulli Beier, *The World is a Dancing Masquerade*, text of conversation between Chinua Achebe and Ulli Beier [Bayreuth: Iwalewa 1991] p. 4.

66. Achebe, 'The Igbo World and its Art'op. cit.

67. The Booker winning Nigerian novel, *The Famished Road* by Ben Okri [London: Jonathan Cape, 1991] is built on the theme of the endless Road and its limitless possibilities. It draws heavily from both the Igbo and Yoruba worlds.

68. Chinua Achebe, 'Dead Men's Path', *The University Herald*, Ibadan, January 1953. Republished in Achebe, *Girls at War and Other Stories* [London: Heinemann, 1972]

69. Biodun Jeyifo profers that a reading of Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* shows that the narrative runs on two lines, one which deals with History capitalized and personified in "'the lords of the Land,'" and another, the "'mini' narratives" dealing with "'small people' in the community". "Among many of the ironic twists" of the novel, he concludes, "is the fact that while the main narrative line about Okonkwo [figure-symbol of the noble] leads to tragedy..., the fragmentary stories and motifs of the *efulefu* [the worthless] move this social class to restitution at the end of the novel." The fact is that it is this disjuncture, the sharpened dichotomisation and active repression of the 'mini' narratives,

the progressive disregard for the worthless [the negative space] which Okonkwo rigidly pursued against the better judgement of the community, which leads to the tragic ending of the novel. See Biodun Jeyifo, 'For Chinua Achebe: The Resilience and Predicament of Obierika', K. H. Peterson and A. Rutherford, eds., *Chinua Achebe: A Celebration* [London/ Sydney: Heinemann International and Dangaroo Press, 1991] p. 64. See also R. N. Henderson, *The King in Every Man* [Yale: Yale University Press, 1972]

70. T. Uzodinma Nwala, *Igbo Philosophy* [Lagos: Lantern Books, 1985] p. 57.

71. Cole and Aniakor, op. cit., p. 83.

72. Ibid., p. 84.

73. A scene from the Smithsonian documentary, *Nigerian Art -Kindred Spirits* [Washington: Smithsonian World, co-produced with WETA, 1990] illustrates this regard for standing space. In it the painter and theorist Uche Okeke is shown with his elderly mother who is producing an uli drawing for the programme. When she stops, Okeke observes that there are lots of open/ fallow areas which could be filled with motifs, to which she replies that the drawing was already saturated. The fallow spaces are not to be trespassed for the fun of it.

74. Achebe and Beier, op. cit., p. 4.

75. Akin Euba, 'Nigerian Music: An Appreciation', *Nigeria Magazine*, special issue, October 1960, p. 198.

76. W. W. C. Echezona, 'Igbo Music', *Nigeria* Magazine, No. 84, 1965, p. 50.

77. Achebe and Beier, op. cit., p. 5.

78. Onuora O. Enekwe, *Igbo Masks: The Oneness of Ritual and Theatre* [Lagos: Nigeria Magazine 1987] p. 79.

79. Achebe and Beier, op. cit., p. 5.

80. Uzo Egonu, 'About Myself and My Work', 1970, published in Egonu, 22 *Prints*, catalogue of exhibition, 1985.

81. Marcuse, op. cit.

82. Ibid., p. 8.

83. Emmanuel Jegede, 'The Vision of Uzo Egonu', *West Africa*, June 11, 1973.

Chapter Five

COMMUNITY AND COMMITMENT

The War Years

A significant element of Egonu's definition of the self, as we have seen, has been that of reclaiming a world view located within a specific world which he identifies as his own. The process of reclaiming a world involves understanding and accepting not only its attitude to the manifestations of reality but first and foremost a definition of this reality. In forming his vision of art and reality Egonu worked from his "base" with a conscious determination to emphasise its distinctness while insisting on its comparability with other worlds and cultures. This clarity of mission signified in the definition and adoption of a specific location enabled him to resist major currents in his immediate social and artistic environment when and where necessary while remaining considerably within the broad parameters of that environment. In other words, he has been able to elect out of prevailing ideological positions in Euro-american art and pursue a personal direction which, even if it occasionally parallels certain strands of current thought, obviously remains independent and resonant of movements and positions defined outside this immediate environment.

It is remarkable that Egonu's art, even when it bears semblance to any of the plethora of stylistic movements in modern art in the last forty-five years, cannot be chronologically or referentially placed within any of these. While some of his

paintings could be compared to those of Joan Miro, for instance, or even pop art in their inclination towards what appropriates commercial decor, he cannot rightly be located within pop art or any other specific movement in Western Modernism. As noted elsewhere, some of his paintings from the pseudo-naivist, early nostalgia period were remotely affined to the kitchen-sink expressionism of the Kings Cross group. But his paintings were products of an entirely different engagement and sensibility, a search quite distinct in its direction and inspiration from the ideological prescripts of the Bomberg school. It is significant to note that while he was interested in landscapes and figures alluding to his childhood, the latter were interested in the deconstruction and demythification of the aesthetic through the subversive hegemonisation of the domestic and proletarian. In effect, despite the formalistic affinities and indeed the undeniable possibilities of epochal influence, it is still clear that Egonu neither belonged nor aspired to belong to the stylistic milieu, or indeed any other.

His development and the phaseal evolution of his work exhibits, at face level, a single-minded individualism which is remarkable as it is important in understanding certain aspects of his work and convictions. Yet, broadly speaking and as hinted in an earlier chapter, there is a discernible if obscure connection between not only the form and content of his work, and those of some of the more significant artists back in his homeland. We did note, without insinuating or confirming any derivative inferences, equal similarity between the pseudo-naivist works and paintings from the middle period of Ben Enwonwu's oeuvre. We have also noted in the last chapter, without meaning to pursue a theoretical assertion, the formalistic parallelisms between his work and aspects of Igbo art. It is significant that some of

the details discussed can also be identified in the work of other modern Igbo artists like Obiora Udechukwu and Uche Okeke in whose works we find the same primation of line and borders, and an equal predilection for contrapuntal orchestration of colour and shape. And although we implied psycho-social explanations rather than group-stylism, it is evident that Egonu has maintained a practice of consciously relating to his backgrounds both past and contemporary not only formalistically but also thematically. Not only has he remained emotionally attached to that background, this attachment becoming more concrete and clearly defined with time, he has also strove to keep contact with developments on a realistic level and, quite essentially too, especially as the dreams of eventual early return home vanished and it became clearer that his career and life was inexorably located in Europe.

If early contact with home was purely emotional, defined more by the individual vision and determination, this was later reinforced by contact with not only his kin in Nigeria but also more and more of the emergent crop of artists and intellectuals, some on a personal and intimate level, like his friendship with Uche Okeke and later with the painter and poet Obiora Udechukwu, and many others through literature, as with the writers Chinua Achebe who is an enthusiastic collector of his prints, and Wole Soyinka, none of whom he has met so far.

It is quite logical to view the parallelisms between Egonu's vision and the nature and form of his work and those of some of these artists not only within the frame suggested in the last chapter but also on the grounds of an awareness of events and developments in the new art and literatures in Africa, much of which is broadly informed by the same background and its perceptions of reality and the world. The question of the relationship between the artist and his community, and the role of art

in society, or what has come to be known as "Commitment", has been one of great significance for African writers and artists for the past thirty years. Since the ascent of a new literary and artistic epoch signified most notably in the publication in 1958 of Achebe's anti-colonialist novel, *Things Fall Apart*, it has occupied a centrality in discourse which quickly fell victim to hasty architects of categories and stereotypes[1].

Leopold Sedar Senghor had indeed prefigured the question in his essay, "L'Esprit de la Civilisation ou les Lois de la Culture Negro-Africaine" in 1956 when he first put down, if only in his vastly polemic style, the position of the inseparability of artist and community in Africa. Senghor asserted that "in Africa, art for art's sake does not exist. All art is social",[2] a position which Achebe would echo years later by asserting that "Art for art's sake is a piece of deodorised dog shit".[3] It is noteworthy that while Senghor was specifically not writing about modern, industrialised Africa with its new values and social structures, and was indeed formulating his theories of art and society in Africa under the strong influence of the French Surrealist and socialist circles of Satre, Mallarme and others, both pioneers of the philosophy of commitment in Europe, Achebe's declaration sought to theorise on not only the art of contemporary African societies but, seemingly, all art.

Achebe has since qualified his position in elaborate explanations of the position of the artist in his society and the context of social expectation and relevance in contemporary Africa. In "The Writer and His Community" Achebe goes beyond the formalistic posts which we identified in the last chapter as defining the Igbo sensibility or world, and details the relationship between that world and the life, practice, and preoccupation of its artists. He redefines the position of the artist in his society by re-emphasising the essential and extreme individualism of the Igbo

personality which guarantees that the artist and his community "do not have to agree on how to make the best mask. But they are all interested in the process of making and the final outcome."[4] This definition differs remarkably from the orthodox qualification of "commitment" whereby society or cause either dictates to the artist or severely delimits his creative and thematic space. Taking time to disclaim the notions of absolute dichotomy between the West and Africa which Senghor verges on, Achebe qualifies commitment as a sense of identification with community which offers both artist and community a grip on reality, whether through an attempt to comprehend or through an effort to reveal and consequently apprehend the forces of that reality.

Wole Soyinka has stated that "for poet, novelist, or sculptor, the artist labours from an in-built, intuitive responsibility, not only to himself, but to his roots."[5] While this is quite disputable, it clearly makes no effort to appropriate the predilection for responsibility or commitment for African art against the art of other cultures. Indeed notable African artists and writers have challenged the orthodox notion of reality and the schematisation of the relationship between artist and community as described earlier, a schematisation which Achebe describes as an "over-simplification", and insisted that the artist must be allowed to exercise his freedom of conception and preoccupation.[6]

Soyinka's position, however, reduces the possibilities of a rift by making it clear that responsibility needs not be conscious, and second that the artist's responsibility to his roots is inevitable and non-negotiable except at great cost, implicitly contractual yet irrevocable, since it is intuitive and its negation is essentially against the nature of the artist. Peter Fuller somewhat corroborates this position when

he notes that Jackson Pollock's frustrations and eventual self-destruction, as well as those of Rothko, Kline, David Smith and Gorki, all members of the abstract expressionist movement in America, was indeed a "historic" and inevitable consequence of the rise of autonomism and the destruction and expulsion of a world view from the creative act, an epochal "failure" resulting from the "inability to find [an alternative] world view."[7]. In other words, in negating the nature of the artist which is, in Soyinka's perception, one of responsibility to oneself and to one's roots, by actively seeking to destroy all links to those roots, the abstract expressionists removed the grounds for not only their art but consequently also for their existence as artists. The repercussion was a general dissatisfaction with their work and lives, and a desperate but frustrated search for the now recondite meaning or essence.

Soyinka further clarifies the meaning of "commitment" by drawing a line between "ideology" and "social vision"[8], and this is a distinction which is very relevant in understanding the nature of the works of not only Egonu and other African visual artists but of Africa's writers as well. While granting the centrality of "concepts of an ideological nature" in much creative production in contemporary Africa, he asserts that a social vision concerns itself primarily with specific aspects and events in social experience, with observations on and projections of society rather than with the philosophical deliberations on the nature of either society or creativity. To extend reflections on reality "beyond the purely narrative" and posit on specific failings of the social arrangement is quite different from speculations on an alternative world view which, quite often, remains more intellectual and theoretical than practical. Social vision therefore qualifies not necessarily an ideological debate in either the creative or political sense but a practical position on experience. And as

we noted in the last chapter, because experience, even at the most internalised and personal level, is human and thus social, reflections on experience whether individual or collective, inevitably assume a social significance. When such reflections relate not only to the personal experience but also the communal or group experience, their social relevance enlarges and the relationship between artist and community is re-emphasised. The essential responsibility to the artist's roots which Soyinka refers to becomes quickly discernible and one may talk of "commitment".

In other words commitment does not necessarily imply a position of politically ideological nature, as is naturally assumed in arguments against committed art or for a "free", autonomous art on one hand, and indeed in some arguments for art of a "committed" or " 'properly' political" nature[9] but the inclination to expand the individual vision and bring this to bear on experience at a broad, collective level.

Commitment in Egonu's work can be seen in this light, for, while most other contemporary African artists have at one point or the other declared positions of an explicit political-ideological nature, that is to say, positions on the left-right political axis, Egonu subscribes to no such positions. Achebe has always projected a socialist predilection, and in the period of Nigeria's second republic made this more explicit by joining one of the two socialist political parties in Nigeria and eventually rising in its ranks to the vice-presidency of the party. Soyinka is a declared socialist who worked closely with some of the more radical socialist and Marxist strains in Nigerian politics in the 1960s,[10] and has consistently declared his predilection for a socialist vision of society. Ousmane Sembene is a proclaimed Marxist who works essentially within the Marxist frame but also within the context of the African situation and history. So is Ngugi wa Thiong'o. Several other African artists,

especially writers, have publicly proclaimed political positions of a specifically ideological nature, even when these are not brought to bear explicitly on their work.

Egonu, however, has no such declared or explicit predilection. Despite a discriminate, clearly discerning disenchantment with the structures of western politics and society,[11] the artist steers clear of any specific positions, somewhat re-emphasising the point made above that commitment to community or possession of a social vision does not imply the search for new world views.

Commitment in Egonu's work is in line with his identification and reclamation of a specific reality and world view. And this process requires a sensitivity and dedication to that reality and the society which created it while essentially invalidating the indiscriminate adoption of any other. Part of his return to this world even included the adoption, during a phase in his work, of a religious predilection or what Soyinka describes as social vision of the religious nature, which derived from and underlined his reclaimed roots and effectively dislodged the iconic foundations of Western society from his world and vision.

In effect the definition of commitment is in the context of a holistic identification with his origins whether formalistically, socially, or spiritually, with an emphasis which in a sense transcends political partisanship or radicalism and resides with what we might call the discerning concern, the propensity to celebrate as well as lament as the situation or mood demands, but at all times be a part.

Commitment in Egonu locates him within the role which Achebe identifies with the artist in African cultures when he writes that "their artists lived and moved and had their being in society, and created their works for the good of that society."[12]

While it would be tempting to doubt the possibilities of fitting into the above

category, an artist who not only works in new media and new circumstances fairly distinct from those of his ancestors but also lives away from his community of origin, it is useful to review the implications of Achebe's description of the artist in African cultures. It is important to note that Achebe speaks of the artist having his or her "being in society." What is signified in this conditionality is not mere habitation but a positive and intense identification, the location of the individual persona in a particular communal context or space not necessarily physically, but through association, adoption, dedication, and contact, a relationship not necessarily concrete but inferential. In the process of self-definition and in establishing a personal base, Egonu not only theoretically or aesthetically locates himself in a specific society quite distinct from that of his domicile, but also, by so doing, synonymises his identity with that society. It is very necessary to remember that the act of aesthetic location was not one merely of appropriation or location of sympathies, as in Picasso or the Western Primitivist school, not even one of homage or pilgrimage to a world or sensibility as is occasionally discernible especially in diasporic culture, the kind of definition of "roots" which Bharati Mukherjee has described as "sentimental attachments to a distant homeland",[13] but one of a return, a re-linking to a reality of which he had direct experience, which gave him his name, and to which he is tied directly by birth. Egonu's prioritisation of what he identified as specifically African in his art was not a voyeuristic act or one of removed romanticism but an understanding of the society which Achebe refers to, in order to relocate his being within that society.

The logical extension of this process, as we shall see shortly, is to define that society in the light of its historical and contemporary configurations. By the historical genesis of physical relocation of African peoples, that society has logically expanded

over time to define not only a geographical circumference on the continent but a most fluid and seamless physical and spiritual reality, a world dispersed and distended and held together not within the boundaries of a land mass but by those of history and commonality of origins and sensibility. The artist's society becomes not simply the Igbo community of his origins, and not merely Nigeria which was but a colonial machination barely three decades old when he left it, or the physical continent with its difficulties of specificity, in other words its inherent ambivalences concerning who and what part is "truly" African - sub-Saharan? Maghreb too? what of white South Africa? - but of the African community, what one might venture to describe as the African nation in the same sense that a Jewish world or nation may be defined no matter how loosely and how vastly distributed. This society, community, nation, world, in its distended spaciality, then squarely locates the artist within itself even in physical reality, which is why some of the works that define Egonu's sense of concern or commitment to community address questions and circumstances not on the continent but outside it, on the greater continent, the human as opposed to the merely physical African continent, the continent in Diaspora.

There is a decided provinciality, or perhaps better still, provenience, to Egonu's vision and identification as an artist. This is a question that deserves dwelling upon briefly. This conscious provinciality, of course, rather than preclude a universality, does indeed underline the universality of experience by alluding to the humanity of its chosen province and provenance, in the same sense that the Nicaraguan singer insists that 'to be "very Nicaraguan" is to be universal', a reaffirmation of the Joycean theory of the provincial. It is important to note that many of the paintings which we will make reference to in discussing the instances and nature of committed art in

Egonu's work decidedly define a racial specificity for the human figure, and this identity is African - or Black. In his series of paintings on addiction, the human figures are unmistakable in their racial identity. The human figure in the Protection series, painted in the 1960s in response to the disintegration of the Nigerian nation and the escalation of violence within it, perhaps more obviously logical, are definitively African by the re-emphasising formalism of colour. But the white figure is not alien to the Egonu painting and quite a number of his portraits and group paintings include what could be rightly identified as white figures. The designated Africanness of the human figure in Egonu's "committed" work implies a provinciality of immediate concern very significant in the context of Western definition of community and universalism with regard to African creative production. In much of what has been described as "colonialist criticism" of African literature, there is a belaboured opposition of "provinciality" to "universality"[14], and within the arguments of this criticism especially of African literature, a defined provinciality becomes a shortcoming and a flaw which rubs off on the quality of a work of art, or specifically, an African work. A novel is much praised for the "universality" of its concern, universality antonymised with "provinciality". In a sense the right to define his community and dedicate his concern, work, and the focus of his vision to this community, is taken away from the artist and it becomes the prerogative of the Western critic to decide when the artist has chosen the wrong community or has no community at all.[15]

This essentially imperialist definition of universality, even the fetishisation of a clearly discriminate universalism, like internationalism, in themselves, deserve deeper and better attention which we can ill-afford here. The point is that the

provinciality of Egonu's commitment is as decided as it is indeed vast. It is clearly defined and delineated to concentrate on his own community without subsumption in the vague territory of a Western defined "humanity", and yet vast enough to encompass a whole world inclusive of an entire race much bigger and vastly dispersed than the Western world. It's space is at least remarkably wider than James Joyce's chosen 'community' of Dublin. What is interesting, which sort of takes us back to the colonialist definition of universality and humanity, is that Joyce's argument that an apprehension of the reality and human condition as it applies to Dublin is sufficient to appropriate the universality of the human condition, a most valid argument, is not disputed at all by the Western apologist school for universalism. Yet Achebe's or Ben Okri's or Egonu's concern with the human condition within Nigeria or Africa, both as diverse and divergent in the complexities of existence as Europe and America, is considered non-universal, lacking in relevance to the totality of human experience. What is deserving of attention is not so much the absurdity of the 'universalist' paradigm in colonialist appreciation of contemporary African culture, but the politics of colonialist criticism, the question of power in a world very actively and strongly held within the constructs of a discriminatory dichotomy against whatever is non-European. In which case it does matter in what light an artist's work is cast especially if he or she lives and works for a livelihood in the West.

On a more specific and indeed more engaging level, Achebe looks at the definition of community in terms of the complexities of the artist's society, in Egonu's case African society on and outside of the continent, and the crucial questions of accessibility of the art work and the specifics of the artist's relationship with his

society.[16] He introduces, in the case of literature, the question of illiteracy and how this delimits, on a broad and basic level, the artist's audience. Of course other questions and factors follow which further delimit this audience, factors such as the role and place of institutions of exposure and awareness, the art racket and market, elitism, patronage, the formalistic and thematic specifics and limitations of the individual work or the artist's style.

The question of accessibility and the artist's audience is one we cannot explore in good detail within the limitations of our immediate concern. What it does, however, is return us to Achebe's description of the original place and condition of the artist in African societies, namely, that he "created his work for the good of his society."[17] This is significant in that it introduces a most essential distinction between 'audience' and 'society'. While accessibility calls in the question of audience and the proximity and physical or visual availability of the artist, in which area it would be overstretching the truth to posit that Egonu has fared very well as far as his chosen community or society is concerned since his works are hardly within the visual reach of that community, the artist's relevance to his society does not at all imply the accessibility of his work to that community.

For the artist to create his art for the good of his society implies several things, means, strategies, and doxa. It is valid to conceive that the artist may contribute to his community not necessarily by donating his work to people in the community, selling to them at cheap prices, exhibiting outside the establishment so they have visual access to his work, in which ways discussants of relevance and communal identification always perceive these questions.

Contemporary definitions of 'community arts' in the West, the Arts Council

of Great Britain module, for instance, are unacceptably narrow and banal in their literality since they restrict relationships between the artist and his community to physical location and even communal production. Within the confines of this definition art for the community is reduced to a residency in the local school or hospital, or the collective production of sculpture for the village park. Without contesting the validity of this concept of art and community, it is necessary to acknowledge a triteness to it which derives from an essentially semantic misconception, the confusion of 'communal arts' with 'art for community'. While the earlier implies a collectivity of experience and an interactive, incestuous artistic relation of such experience, the later entertains the possibility of deputation or individual assumption of responsibility outside the immediate reaches of the collective, the legitimacy of representation, of the individual burden, and indeed penance. The earlier precludes the possibility and historical validity of the artist as visionary and self-appointed re-presentative of his community, projecting that community beyond the confines of its physical or material possibilities.

This raises the issue of the relevance and potentialities of the creative work, a most hackneyed question which, like most philosophical and social questions, continues and will continue to demand and deserve attention. An understanding of the potentials of the work of art clarifies the possibility of commitment and relevance to a society which has no immediate or direct access to the artist's work. It shows how a community can in fact own an artist who is removed physically from it and claim him and gain from his work outside of his original physical environment.

The question is better illustrated than theoretically argued, and the history of art and society provides ample illustration. One form of relationship between the

artist, his work, and community, involves direct use, the direct employment of the work of art in the daily lives of individuals or the collectivity in a community. Relevance as it is generally defined falls here, detailing the employment of art in worship, in the public place, and in the home. Art also possesses the potential of service to community without coming into contact or under the control or direct experience, even direct manipulation, of that community whether individually or collectively. Perhaps literature provides the best examples here, examples which arguably manifest the nature and possibilities of all art. Theories of the novel and the nation state illustrate how an essentially elitist form not only defines but possesses the potentials of shaping epochs and affecting, positively or otherwise, populations without access to it.

The wider possibility of art consists in what we might call its mediating potentials whereby the artist is transformed into an intermediary either between sections of his community or between his community and another. The audience equally matters here, but its nature and constitution necessarily changes. The ability of art to stand between its producer and a consumer enamours the producer to transmit a position which he shares with one section of humanity to another. Thus is it possible for the artist to establish a dialogue between not only himself and an his audience but also between two communities or societies through the work of art. He either synonymises himself with this community, which now speaks through him and him through his work, or he assumes a mere representative or mediative position. On occasions his position may indeed be only that of the observer who passes on a position or sensibility from one provenance to another. A community whose views or sensibilities are communicated to another in this manner thus comes within the

affecting possibilities of art without necessarily coming in contact, experiencing visually, or owning the work of art.

A good example this century is the international art effort for the resistance against General Franco and for Republican Spain, which brought together such major art personalities as Pablo Neruda who, with Nancy Cunard, published the poetry chapbook, *Les Poetes du Monde Defendent le Peuple Espagnol* from Paris, publishing contributions by writers as varied as W. H. Auden and Stephen Spender, among others, Andre Malraux, Luis Aragon, the Mexican Octavio Paz, Miguel Hernandez, Cesar Vallejo and several others from around the world. The essence of the effort was to bring the Spanish Tragedy to the attention of the world and to keep it in the mind of the international community till Spain was rescued and the crimes against its people avenged. In this manner, though the Spanish people had little access to the work of these writers - a war-front edition of Neruda's *Espana en el corazon* was seized and incinerated by the Spanish fascist forces - art stepped in between them and the world, undertaking perhaps not to vanquish Franco but to communicate the anguish and sufferings of the Spanish people to the world. If the Spanish poet Rafael Alberti was directly accessible to the Spanish people, choosing to make himself and his art available to the struggle against fascism by taking to the war front and singing his poetry to soldiers fighting and those in barracks of the resistance, the others who applied their art and strengths to keeping the thorn of the Spanish war stuck into the conscience of the world were as much artists for that community as Alberti in a manner that even the dedication of the Spaniard Picasso could not match.[18]

In the same sense, if in a fairly different manner, much African writing this century has located itself in this context of service to community, even where this

community is a personally perceived, self-defined one, without necessarily being of immediate access to that community.

The peculiar circumstances of South African writers, for instance, has often made it inevitable that in all their commitment - commitment which is often explicit in its political partisanship - most of them can not be reached by their community. The machineries of the Apartheid State ensures, all too often, that their works are banned in South Africa, and that they are prohibited from interaction with their community either through restrictive legislations like confinement, as in the case of Alex La Guma in 1961 and many others after that, or restriction to a particular district and retraction of their freedom to produce creative work, or outright banishment into exile which is the fate of the majority of the country's major writers. In such circumstances, one's available audience does not become his community for the mere reason that his real community is beyond access to him or he to it, and committed contribution and dedication to that community is defined in terms of work on its behalf within the space of the artist's audience. In this sense South African writers, perhaps more than its artists, have remained not only fanatically committed to the South African society but also to "committed" art, this indeed re-emphasised recently in the much discussed call by one of the exiled writers, Albie Sachs, for an even sharper sense of commitment in art and writing, a forceful dedication of the creative calling to the restructuring of South Africa.

Although the publication of Achebe's *Things Fall Apart,* in 1958 has been described as "a landmark in the cultural and political development of Africa",[19] and his writing in general hailed as a most significant contribution not only to an understanding of his own society but of the entirety of colonial Africa, it is

remarkable that his works are not directly accessible to a great portion of his community. For one, none of his works in English, which is almost all of his writing, is available in his own language in translation, and an appreciable portion of the Igbò population cannot read English. Nevertheless, this has not affected the very high regard in which he is held by that community, manifest not only in the recognition he has received from the section which has access to his work but also in titular honours and positions of a more provincial nature which he holds in his home town of Ogidi where he was chosen as President of the Town Union. Even the non-literate members of his community are able to recognise his contributions in the area of projecting to his audience the humanism of his people and their heroism before the colonial onslaught, efforts which have inevitably portrayed them in a different and more realistic and reverential light before the world.

In this context then, community is clearly desynonymised with audience, and commitment is projected not in the mundane sense of availability for direct consumption but in service, albeit self-appointed, through representation before an audience fairly distinct from the artist's own community.

On a different level, it could be argued that physical removal from the community does not constitute automatic or perpetual alienation from it and that indeed an element of distancing from the community is essential for a proper articulation of its experience and a successful fulfilment of its creative expectations. Theoretically, Gikandi has argued, drawing from Achebe's studies of the arts and community among the Igbo, that "the artist in the Igbo aesthetic achieves creativity when he or she is isolated 'from the larger community in a ritual with more than a passing resemblance to their own death or funeral'"[20] Here Achebe and Gikandi refer

to the production of Mbari during which the artists are mandatorily removed from the rest of the community, a most severe level of alienation and disengagement considered necessary, on one level, for the measure of sanctity required for the production of an artistic sacrifice to the goddess of sanctity, and on another, equally significant level, for the solitude which the creative process demands.

In another essay different from that which Gikandi makes reference to, Achebe observes that the Igbo observed and respected the solitudinous nature of the creative individual and considered him essentially removed, by his calling, from the rest of his community. Thus is he "excused from the normal demands of sociability. [And] if further proof is required of this need for privacy in the creative process, it is provided clearly and definitively in the ritual seclusion of the makers of Mbari".[21] In other words, in a society where elitism was precluded from artistic practice, the artist was equally conceived as deserving, by the demands of creative work, of a distance, an individual space not only spiritual but also physical.

It would not be wrong to reinterpret this institutionalised alienation in terms of transcommunal disjunction within the context of modernisation and the withering away of borders, and to venture a theory of "essential alienation" as basis for the relocation of the modern artist. In the Igbo world, physical distance, rather than sever the artist from his community, is a recognised necessity for not only creative fulfilment but with this, fulfilled communal relevance. If physical disengagement was involuntary in the old society, and was constricted spatially and geographically, transforming within the circumstances into almost a symbolic rite, a totemic relationship, in the new and wider society these constrictions are whittled down and the physical dimensions of distance expand almost infinitely, while the intervention

of secularism, while it does not necessarily diminish the symbolicism of this distance, strips it of strictly ritual configurations. The symbolic, ritual removal of the artist from the rest of society equates, within the loose structures of modern society, the spiritual and physical distance between the exile and his community since the later, by its very nature, retains and indeed thrives on the sustenance of the string of identification with home and the group, on nationalism and the continuous construction and possession of an identity distinct from the homogeneity of the space of relocation.

But even beyond this concept of physical distance as a creative requisite, the exile's conscious re-appropriation of his perceived heritage, or his construction and assumption of an identity located within this heritage, constitutes in itself a restitution, and logically relocates him within that community. While there may be an inconsistency of knowledge in the sense that the community itself may not be aware of, or indeed recognise, this reunion, its symbolic validity is not in the least diminished. The process of defining and assuming - of 'identifying with' - establishes a link no matter how ambivalent, between the artist and a community, physical distance becoming only an incidental equable to that original, requisite creative distance.

In his essay, "George Lamming and the Colonial Situation" Ngugi wa Thiong'o[22] shows that Lamming in fact posits the necessity of exile in negating the permanent alienation of the West Indian, which of course includes also the West Indian artist. Lamming's characters insist that, for a proper understanding of the homeland or original community, one must be removed from it first, and in experiencing the outside come to see it in a different, more endearing light. One of

the characters from the novel, *The Emigrants*, insists that:

> If there is one thing England going to teach all o' we is that there ain't no place like home no matter how bad home is... those comin' after goin' make better West Indian men for coming up here and seein' for themselves what is what.[23]

In other words to become a proper or "better" part of that community, to know it and believe in it, one needs escape it and in the process of alternative experience come to appreciate and identify with it, reclaim it. This of course brings to mind Egonu's statement when he said: "it dawned on me that I am a Nigerian, an African. It dawned on me that in the culture in which I live I would never be accepted."[24]

It is in this essential context that community and commitment in Egonu's work must be viewed and comprehended. What we see is an artist who, within the limitations of circumstances even beyond those of the aristocratic nature of contemporary art and the elitisising functions of art institutions, circumstances of geographical dislocation and even of the politics of race, patronage, and projection, strives to be relevant to his community by apprehending its diverse complexities and experiences at different social and historical moments and projecting these before his limited and distinct audience, and so not passively but with intent to elicit reaction, to engage and receive response, which in the long run is calculated and anticipated to benefit that community. In some of his most significant paintings in the past thirty years Egonu has identified a specific position for himself as an artist within that community which at the beginning of his mature artistic life he defined as his base.

It is safe to conceive that the artist, in his studies of the art of his Igbo origins and that of many other African cultures, and understanding the place, role, and social expectations of the artist in that society as Achebe has also outlined it, considered as well the peculiarities of contemporary arrangements which do not provide every

artist a physical location in the community, within the structures and physical definitions of a closed, self-contained society with clear relationships and positions for its members. While in the past the artist was almost compelled to live and move and have his being physically within his community, contemporary society on the contrary often compels him, indeed, to seek survival outside of the physical borders of his community, at times remarking the boundaries of that community or occasionally offering him opportunity even to redefine or reject it in preference for another, in other words to choose or create his own community. The links between artist and community transcend, then, physical or even institutional bonds, bonds of employment and patronage, in a manner fairly unimaginable in the past. Role and expectation become less matters of an apparent and imperative nature and commitment more a moral prerogative of the artist than an indistinct part of the architecture of communal existence.

Acting on this prerogative, the artist is free to define individually the nature of his service to his chosen or identified community. And when circumstances preclude domicile within this community or provision of artistic service of the direct form, he can provide service of a different nature, as the representative or ambassador of his community in a manner conceived to benefit it either by bringing it into dialogue with his immediate audience or by presenting its situation before that audience with intent to affect it. By seeking to affect his audience on behalf of his community, the artist draws attention to aspects of the human condition within his community, and may indeed elicit useful response in this respect. This manner of service is as significant as an arrangement whereby the artist sits among his people to provide them with ritual figures and ceremonial masks.

That way the artist is able still to "create his work for the good of" his community without necessarily living and moving physically within it, and without working under its patronage and direction. As Egonu himself has put it, "if you are living here [in Europe], you cannot say, no, I am African, I have to be in Africa."[25] The meaning of service and commitment is extended and amplified more realistically in the light of changing structures and bonds. The artist becomes an emissary, an ambassador for his community in a new world of unprecedented and unique relationships, an expanding world demanding of new arrangements between the individual and the commune, between commune and the outside, between the outside and its aliens and emigres. By introducing aspects of his world into his new environment the artist unites his community with the outside, thus opening up possibilities of not only exploiting this outside but subverting it also, and in so doing reversing the mono-linear structure of the colonial arrangement.

It is in this sense, indeed, that the necessary physical alienation or relocation of the artist assumes an ideological dimension for colonised communities and peoples, especially when this relocation situates the artist or intellectual within the bowels of empire. This process brings the artist in line with the anti-colonial movement, even if he does not accept this or identify with it. There is an inevitability here, for whether the artist from the colony who is alienated to the imperial centre recognises his position or not, it is an inescapable position with only few possibilities for the individual; those of self-definition and self-rejection. The exegeses of exile in the empire strip creative alienation of its personal definitions, if ever there were such dimensions to the act of removal from community, and impose on the emigre the stamp of ambassador, with options of responsible representation, or in the alternative,

abdication of responsibility. And this, in a complex way, is directly linked to the individual's configuration of his position and location within imperial society since, in relocation, the emigre ceases to be a mere individual, a mere member of society, but transforms into an Other, an alien, an outsider, a spectacle. To both his community and the host society he is a representative of his place of origin, irrespective of any efforts on his part to deny or escape this. Within the space of his transposition he becomes "not one of us", and automatically "one of them", and very little can be done to dislodge this responsibility.

Exile or emigration, especially in the context of colony-to-empire relocation, therefore, transforms the artist's necessary alienation into an act of assumption of responsibility, and imposes a constriction on him, tying him inalienably to that which he has moved away from. This way he can only claim freedom at the cost of double alienation, at the cost of suicide. Only then can he hope for co-option into the host society, only when he rejects his links with his origins and redefines himself as a vagrant, as one without origins. To de-link with community is only possible at a price; a process of cultural and spiritual kenosis, in addition to the original alienation through physical relocation. In other words the artist from the colony, for as long as he retains a sense of "original" self, is inexorably bound to his community, bound at the price of death. Between community/ responsibility, and abdication/ death, there are no options. To live is to be committed to community, the original community. To escape this binding responsibility is to create a new self, to seek a new commitment.

In his poem, A Far Cry from Africa, Derek Walcott defines the position of the emigre artist from the colony in the centre of empire:

> ...how choose
> Between this Africa and the English tongue I love?

Betray them both, or give back what they give?
...
How can I run from Africa and live?[26]

If for some this space is one of dilemma, as evident in Walcott's poem, redefining the "removal for realisation" or creative alienation we posited above and transposing on it the constrictions of a possibly inhibitive past, for others it is one of reaffirmation and of positive rediscovery and redefinition of the self. This one might call 'the Jonah option', which begins in desperation as the emigre tries to break out of and away from the hold of his origins and, as he seeks to locate himself not merely physically but equally ideologically, definitively, within his new environment. When this meets with the inevitable futility which every such effort must face, the emigre then reassumes, not with fatalism or resignation but affirmatively, his position of responsibility. The momentarily fugitive emissary is forced back unto himself by the exigences and difficulties of his repulsion, an experience akin to Jonah's failed escape in the Bible. Rather than be swallowed by the sea - the faceless, depthless space of the host society which often insinuates itself upon the imagination and fascination of the new or proposing emigre but which does not, in reality, exist in precise terms [nothing is depthless, nothing shapeless] - he is hedged out, consigned and marginalised, as in the whale's belly, and redelivered unto the original, Other space from whence he came. From there he may recommence his efforts at escape, or better still, recognise his Otherness and accept it, together with all its implications including the duties of responsible representation.

It is within these parameters that Egonu's war paintings and sculptures, his prints on themes affecting the Black community and the future of the race, all fit within this context of essential commitment to community, and to self.

NATION, SELF, AND WAR

Few things have affected Egonu more personally and strongly, with the exception perhaps of his illnesses in the 1980s, than the tragedy of the Nigerian nation in the long half decade from the middle to the end of the 1960s.

The liberation movement in Africa, and the wave of new nations beginning with the independence of Ghana in 1958, was as we indicated earlier, a historical development of enormous significance for most Africans, more especially the emigres in the heart of Empire. The making of nation is not only a geo-political process but also a psychological one. It occurs not only on the grand scale of the relationships of peoples but also at the individual level in the definition of the colonial. The emergence of "nation" and "nationhood" not only defines a separation from the imperial centre and the institution of new parameters of freedom and vision, but also a new individual with a new identity who is conceptually akin to Che Gueverra's "New Man" if not specifically so. The eventual humiliation of Empire, as most colonials, especially emigres, perceived the demise of imperialism in Africa, symbolised their own coming into being as full-fledged individuals with dignity and deserving of respect. They were no longer subjects but citizens of nations, 'foreigners' as opposed to faceless, second class members of a vast, vague sea of imperial vassalage. They were relocated from the peripheries of an amorphous yet discriminatory commonality to the centres of separate spaces, irrespective of what positions the reluctant empire condemned them to within its shrinking borders. In the new nation was the new man, the true emigre, who, if he had problem initially identifying and accepting the relationship with his origins which we outlined above,

now found positive, ennobling reason so to do. The vassal here-to-fore ashamed of his story and identity, cringing and struggling to creep into the bowels of the 'centre', finds a plurality of emergent centres as opposed to a singular, receding one. He identifies his own nation as a victorious centre as against a vanquished one, a centre with new visions and possibilities as against an exhausted, disgraced one.

But independence posed its own challenges. To finally invalidate ideological foundations of the colonising mission, it was now the duty of the newly independent nationalists to exhibit the abilities of self-governance and efficient modernisation without recourse to the outside. No other way could they nullify the grand narrative which located them opposite civilisation and justified the introduction of salvation through the humanist interventionism of the civilised world.

Euphoria was thus mixed with both brash optimism and genuine anxiety. For those living at the centre of the fallen Empire their status hung in a balance and pride was checked by this frightening possibility; that the new nations might indeed collapse. Such collapse would then justify, if not the return of the coloniser, dishonour at best, and indeed at a more realistic level not only scorn but a precarious and risk-laden existence within the insecure holds of the old centre. If colonial emigres suffered mildly as the lower caste of Empire, the decolonising process had actively turned them into permanent enemies and detractors, into perpetual outsiders. Where initially a level of common identification with the peoples of the centre existed within the theoretical if spurious concept of the 'Motherland', united if not in reality at least in the commonality of institutions of Empire, the dismemberment of the imperial structure, thanks to the agitation of the former colonial, inserted a permanent antagonism between him and his former coloniser, and for those inhabiting the heart

of the old structure, only strong and successful nationhood at home could guarantee the most minimal physical and psychological security.

The reaction of the colonising populations to citizens of the emerging nations during the period of agitation for independence was impregnated with unprecedented levels of hostility and violence. In France, Algerians were murdered in the streets just as they were murdered back in their homeland by French forces. In Britain the spin-off of the disengagement of former colonies from the stranglehold of the Imperial centre came in the form of hostile, anti-immigrant laws in the early 1960s. If such were the prices of nationality and nationhood, the failure of the nationalist undertaking promised even higher prices.

Just as the birth of an independent nation helped shape and strengthen Egonu's nationalist predilections as well as create and define his artistic and cultural persona, the uncertainties that gradually crept in like cracks on the wall of the new nation inescapably replicated themselves on this persona. If the emergence of nation signifies the maturation of the new 'native' - for nation, as Raymond Williams notes, "is radically connected to 'native' ",[27] and indeed comes to symbolise the new personality, the later being merely a symbiotic replication of the former construction, the collapse of this construction simultaneously signifies the demise of the figure of the new 'native'. So does this bear double significance, for not only is the new 'native' conceptually returned to the state of vassalage, he indeed experiences for the first time, a process of descent in the sense that while the original fall is a symbolic notch in his history, a moment in the inherited but not experienced past, this second fall is his directly. It projects itself also in the ghastliness of betrayal, a betrayal of not only the self but also of the past, a validation of the original violation. The imminence of

this moment for the former colonial brings with it extreme anxiety and initiates a crisis, especially in the emigre who, not being on the ground, is unable to assess the circumstances concretely and correctly, and is therefore liable to greater inaccuracy in his desperation/ despair, as in his romanticism.[28]

By 1963 the fate of the Nigerian experiment was already in deep doubt, with the advent of threats to the democratic process, uprisings in the west of the country, and eventually, the alleged attempt to cease the reigns of power through violence organised by the leader of the opposition, Chief Obafemi Awolowo. Awolowo was tried in what was itself a sensational trial for the project of nationhood, and found guilty of high treason with the sentence of life in prison. With the opposition leader convicted of an attempt to upset the machineries of state, anarchy had clearly set in, and with it great anxiety, even bitter despondency.

By 1966, just as he was consolidating the grounds of his artistic being worked out in line with his national identity, the anxieties of a precarious historical moment began to show in Egonu's work. As the boat of self-governance rocked in Nigeria, slowly sinking under the weight of corruption, disregard for the rule of law, political opportunism, irresponsibility, and escalating violence, disappointment transformed into genuine apprehension and the initial glow of hope turned into fear. Chaos had taken over and tragedy was inevitable.

In order to avert the increasing disorder and absurdity which by now configured the Nigerian polity, a group of young soldiers intervened on January 15, 1966, bringing the crumbling democratic dispensation to a destined halt. But the peculiar circumstances of this genuine and well-intended armed intervention, rather than avert it, deepened the crisis and led directly to the feared tragedy. In stead of

restoring the nation to sanity as intended, the military intervention furthered its disintegration as sections of the country interpreted the failed coup and its aftermath each in its own way. Unfortunately, a particular section had taken the brunt of the violence which the coup unleashed for the logical reason that it provided the most important personalities in the collapsing government. Even less fortunately, the cream of the group of young nationalists who led the coup came from another section of the country which historically provided the most intelligent, well-educated and highly ambitious and visionary members of the army.

It was easy, then, to read sectionalism into their action, especially as some sections of the international media undertook to spread the sentiment of sectionalist vendetta in the circumstances.[29] According to Bolaji Akinyemi, the British press could indeed be rightly held responsible for the greater propensity towards this interpretation of the events of January 1966, and one newspaper actively insinuated the possibility of retributive violence not in prophecy but in irresponsibility.[30] In reprisal, a pogrom was unleashed on citizens who had their origins in the accused section of the country.

In Northern Nigeria, and eventually in the Western region, members of the Igbo group from among whom many of the coup leaders came, were targeted for annihilation, and were daily massacred in great numbers. Not only had the dream nation eventually collapsed, the price of this was an even greater tragedy in human terms.

If Achebe could predict the events in his novel, *A Man of the People*, which was published almost to the day of the eventual termination of Nigeria's First Republic, it is unclear that Egonu could do the same, being physically removed and therefore

having access only to the less accurate picture of the situation especially as portrayed by the British press. However, as the world media closely followed the political upheavals and the impending election crises, daring occasionally to predict a collapse or disintegration of the nation - Basil Davidson had noted in the *Daily Mirror* of London as early as December 1964 that a real danger of disintegration existed[31] - raising genuine anxiety especially in those who were not on the ground to know the exact situation, Egonu responded in a number of paintings both signifying his anxiety and in a sense bearing an element of the apocalyptic.

Notable among these is the "Tiger" of 1965, and "Cheetah attacking its prey", which introduced a new symbolicism to the series of paintings of animals he did that year, including "Goldie in Captivity", a painting of a falcon in gouache on paper, and "Dog named lost", a drawing in ink on canvas, both of which drew from actual incidents in London and indicated more the artist's compassion for animals than any of the projective significations discernible in the other two, significations he would retain and extend in subsequent animal paintings throughout the rest of the decade. These paintings, including the "Leopard" of 1966, "End of a Sheep" and "Two Fighting Cocks" of 1967, and "Death of an Elephant" in 1968, all deal with the themes of anxiety, uncertainty, danger, insecurity, and strife on a magnified level. These are not based on factual incidents involving animals as in the others which could indeed be regarded as visual footage, but work as apocalyptic fiction in response to the historical situation of the artist's endangered homeland.

"Tiger" is a bold painting of a reclining tiger. The animal is set across the plane of the picture, dominating it. It is orange with stripes, and is set against a dark background of sparse vegetation and lattice-work, presumably a cage or metal

enclosure. Above the animal are big stripes which resemble a ring-side rope work and descend in a central, circular aperture like a barred shutter. The vegetation is no vegetation really, only a few leaves that look more like ears of wheat. The tiger is not in an entirely reclining position either, and rather leans on its forelegs in discernible anxiety, like the crouch before a defensive strike. The atmosphere of bondage or restraint is emphasised by the bodily encasement of the animal in an extension of the mentioned rope work, and in the proportional location of the animal in the picture, struggling almost physically across the composition and visually uncomfortable. The dark spaces around press down on the animal and leave no breathing room. In its crouch the animal leaves the unsettling feeling of a silent struggle between itself and the enclosing space, as well as one of imminent unwinding, a moment of unleashing. The eyes are tiny, blank and diamond shaped, set in the middle of the face, evoking a blind and cold unease.

The inferable intention of this picture, or what Baxandall would refer to as the artist's discernible "specific brief", is to recreate through metaphors a moment of historical uncertainty in the fate of a society. By choosing the figure of the tiger, the artist seems to imply a certain viciousness not necessarily in the character of that society but in the nature of the historical moment, an atmospheric viciousness. By encaging the animal, there is an indication that this viciousness, as far as the artist can perceive it or is willing to grant, is more latent than already manifest. The blank stare of the tiger qualifies this potential, locating it outside the realm of the contemplative or rational. The animal may be caged, but it is also lurking, crouching, held down by the strictures of institutional order. One element of the composition is that the restraining structure is only alluded to and not defined. Nor does it

completely box in the animal. It is therefore present, but not foolproof.

If one should hazard an extension of this line of interpretation, one could say that the interplay of elements and metaphors in the picture reflects a certain precariousness presaging possible anarchy and/ or tragedy, all of which would aptly qualify the Nigerian predicament at that moment in history. The animal is the latent violence of all societies, held in check by structures of organised existence, in the specific case those of democratic nationhood. But even this is inscribed in its own internal ambivalence, first in the fact that constriction is not the natural and rightful domain of the wild beast which, by being cast in bondage, begins to assume the empathising element of beauty and in a sense casts our reading aside unless one accepts the fatalist argument of the frailties of human nature or of the inescapability of fate. In other words, if the tiger is the historical moment, deserving of release, then one accepts the inevitability, indeed the necessity and normality, of danger and viciousness, implying a certain fascist sadism in the metaphorical intent of the picture.

The artist's own explanation is closer to our initial schema, namely, that the metaphorical allusion is to what the poet Christopher Okigbo, in his own apocalypse of the period referred to as the "smell of blood.../ in the lavender mist of the afternoon".[32] His recollection does not incorporate the trajectories of the main line of signification such as we have detailed, which does not however invalidate them in any way, especially since we cannot always take artists's explanations literally or see them as sufficient to contain the possibilities of a work of art.

The "Leopard" of 1966 realises the anticipation of the "Tiger". It is unclear yet at what precise moment in 1966 this picture was painted - the artist does not recollect

- but this would presumably be after the events of January. "Leopard" is oppositional to the earlier painting both in form and design, though it equally employs an animal metaphor. For one, it is conceived on a perpendicular axis, with the animal centrally positioned as in the other, but this time assuming a half-diagonal rather than a horizontal. The picture is divided in three horizontal parts, marked by indeterminate elements on the left, and the head of the animal is placed slightly above the line of the lower segment, its bared teeth and red tongue located dead on the line. On the perpendicular axis the mouth is dead on the central line, one what, to presage reading, Barthes would call the *clivage*, the split between parts.[33] Also, but for a dull red portion in the top left of the painting in, and a sprawling foreground stippled in pale cobalt and burnt sienna, the red of the barred mouth, the purest red in the picture, makes it the visual centre, and by extension the locus of signification.

As already said, the leopard, bulky and emphatic, falls along a diagonal, its head on the lower part as it approaches, creating the unsettling image of an arrow in descent. The animal is on a prowl, and the spatial organisation emphasises this by creating room for it. It is cast forth from the picture plane by a black background set under a form of canopy, this giving the impression of a doorway and underlining the act of emergence, the leap-out. While the tiger is reclining, restrained, the leopard is in the act of charging, lately loosened. There is no clear indication of vegetation, and the animal emerges into what seems like a barren ground. A few decorative elements occur, but purely as design. Notable as well are the eyes of the beast, no longer diamond and blank but beady and blood-shot. The leopard is fierce, its stare intense. The scenario immediately recalls Yeats "The Second Coming", part of which forms the epigram to Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*. The forces of anarchy, the restrained

viciousness contained in the metaphor of the caged, reclining tiger, are unleashed in the charging leopard. As the institution of state collapsed in Nigeria, the latent viciousness of the population is unleashed in all its ferocity, and "mere anarchy is loosed upon the world". In 1968 Lawrence Bradshaw would summarise the significance of this metaphor in his appreciation of the paintings and the historical moment that produced it when he wrote: "Today Death walks abroad.".[34] In "Cheetah attacking its Prey" [1966], and perhaps even more clearly in "No place for the weak" [1968], we see the ultimate fulfilment of the apocalypse as the beast devours its victim, signifying the momentary triumph of the strong over the weak.

But if the forces of destruction, disorder and death are loosed upon the world like a beast upon a landscape, one recourse is to the pristine sacredness of faith and the right to human safety and protection. In Egonu's subsequent paintings, the series on *Spiritual Protection,* he moves from the apocalyptic vision to one of entreaty, addressing the themes of flight, refuge and protection. The Ecumenicals, as we may call this series of pictures employing the principal metaphor of religious architecture, are at once appeals for protection for the threatened and persecuted, as well as entreaties for sanity and reason. They posit, on a level, the common kin of peoples, and the equality if not sameness of faiths. It is logical to suggest that this vision of religious tolerance and the primacy of faith and spirit, at once desperate and frustrated, builds on the context of religious acrimony, real and invented, which, as mentioned earlier, was offered as explanation for the events in Nigeria in 1966 and afterwards.

"Universal Mosque" [1966] is an oil in burnt sienna and blue showing a mosque. Architecturally, the mosque is most unusual, and bears no distinct or

peculiar islamicism in its form. It is built on what appears like a half rectangular floor plan yet is discernibly circular, cut into like an apple to provide a niche which serves both as courtyard and entrance and provides a narrow corridor to the right of the building, this section being an angular sphere in red brick or stone, with a ribbed dome presumably in brick also, or cast copper. The dome is more like a cupola with a central projection, and bears greater semblance to that on St. Peters in London or St. Paul's in Rome than to the more ornamental dome in islamic religious architecture. The left section of the building is a long hall with what appears to be a small tower with an exterior flight of stairs in weathered stone. The windows and door are arched, and on the frontispiece is a scrawled inscription which reads: Universal Mosque, and which indeed is our one formal clue to the identity of the building. The painting is obviously a night scene, providing atmosphere for the phosphorescent light to issue from inside the mosque through its windows and door. To the left of the mosque is the outline of a tree, and to emphasis the circular plan of the lay-out, arch of the dome is echoed in the background in the reclining stem of a shrub which resembles the edge of a platform and ends to the left in what might be a little pool.

On one level, the facelessness or formalistic ambiguity of the mosque subverts its sectarian specificity and signifies the universality/ nationality which the artist means to establish in the title and theme of the work. It not only demythicises the icon but through that the faith, and in so doing subverts the barrier which the myth of Otherness erects.

Conceptually, the artist dialectically counterpoises nationality against sectionalism and subsumes the later under the former. In the age of the 'nation' the

'sect' is a threat, a primordialism which must be relegated and subdued, if not completely dislodged, not only in aspiration towards the Bakhtinian ideal whereby the '*natio*' overrides sect and "the period of national languages coexisting but deaf to one another, comes to an end", but also as a requisite in the power struggle between the crumbling Empire and the emergent nation. The fragility of the new nation state, the uncertainties of its disengagement from the formidable Empire, and the pressures of self-legitimation, heighten the dangers of a tolerant disposition to disruptive and divisive internal conflict which resurgent sectarianism perpetrates. In such situations the conflict becomes not only one between different sects but also between the sects and the nation, between sectionalism and 'national unity'. 'Universal Mosque', rather than antagonise sects, de-sectionalises them, removes them from the space of the faction and relocates them in that of the nation, the democratic commonwealth, thereby diffusing their disintegrative potential .

This strategy of neutralisation through nationalisation is demonstrated recently in the statement of Algerian patriarch and Liberation hero Mohammed Boudiaf as he sanctioned the military suspension of democratic elections in Algeria to avert an Islamic fundamentalist victory at the polls. Boudiaf asserted that "Islam belongs to all Algerians, not a few. We will permit no individuals or group to claim a monopoly on Islam and use it to threaten the country.".[35] Not possessing Boudiaf's political structures so as to institutionally and practically assert the nationalism of faith as a strategy for its de-sectionalisation and neutralisation, Egonu seems in these paintings to couche a nationalist claim in a universalist argument.

Also, by deconstructing and nationalising faith through form, opening up its boundaries, the artist insinuates discursive room into what otherwise would be

transgression. By arguing the borderlessness of Faith and the spirituality of the human being, he equally infers the universality of the human right to not only faith and conviction, but also to security and sanctuary without discrimination. If "Universal Mosque" signifies the anxiety of a nationality and an individual identity threatened with disintegration, it also argues the right to safety, signifying in religion and religious space the idea of safety, security, immunity as integrity. The sanctity of this space becomes a shield against insecurity and the threat of violence and violation, harm or annihilation, and the right to this protection must be granted all, just as should the right of claim to a faith.

As the conflict in Nigeria escalated, resulting in the massacre of thousands of Igbo people and East Nigerians in other parts of the country, Egonu's concerns are seen to shift again, this time from the initial anxiety over nation and [national] self polysemously 'masked' in the universalist arguments of "Universal Mosque", to the broad levels of the human condition. As violence becomes a presence rather than a mere threat, the artist's initial concerns seem to give way quickly to arguably more fundamental human questions, those of individual human lives, though the nationalist nature of this concern does not necessarily diminish. One could indeed argue that what we witness is the manifestation of that process by which, according to Timothy Brennan, 'nation' and nationalism undergo a "semantic shift" in the discourse of former colonials.[36] In the face of conflict, depending on the nature of such conflict or disjuncture, allegiance to the 'nation' undergoes a pragmatic transfiguration. This shift could be towards extremist patriotism, as is the case in fascist nationalism, or on the other hand, towards the lamentatious pain of the neo-colonial critique. It may range from dedication to the invention and perpetuation of

nation, to a recoil from the group and a withdrawal toward the individual.

In "Sanctuary in the Chapel" [1966], which belongs with the ecumenicals, the artist makes a gradual shift from the universality-of-faith platform to that of the inalienability of the human right to protection, moving from the nationalisation of the sectarian to the individuation of the national. The nature of nationalism changes as the tragedy of national chaos and disintegration is projected not in the intangible frames of an invented collective or community but in the harsh arena of individual, human anguish. The argument is no longer so much one of retaining the 'nation' as of protecting the 'inalienable human' rights of the individual, of a people.

At this stage the human figure makes its appearance in the ecumenicals, in this case a lone, genderless figure - the area of the breast is obscured by a raised hand, effectively erasing gender specificity by making it indeterminable. Where the more philosophical discourse of faith and universality is ensigned in the anonymity of symbolic architecture, in "Sanctuary in the Chapel" the human dimension of a mutating discourse is introduced. By employing a solitary human presence, the painting steers clear of genre and the social chronicle, thus remaining only within the space of signification. The lone refugee represents the group, the persecuted, the weak, this later category re-emphasised in the later painting, "No Place for the Weak". The appearance of the Cross in "Sanctuary" may also be taken to stand for religion and religious space generally, and not for a singular faith. Otherwise a contrapuntal argument arises which counters Christianity - the religion of the majority of the persecuted Igbo - with Islam, the dominant religion of the persecuting North. Although it could be argued quite plausibly too that the appearance of the Chapel as a space of protection and refuge, refuge and sanctuary, signalling both desperation

and vanquish, signifies the failure of the ecumenical argument, the failure of the universalisation-neutralisation discourse. Within this frame, therefore, an unsubdued sect, represented by Islam, overpowers the non-believing individual, while the alternative, opposition faith offers refuge. A value signification then arises, concluding in an ultimate sectionalist resolution. Nationalism finally gives way to sectarianism. But issues are never so simple and straightforward.

Beyond the text, such argument is undermined both by the artist's ambivalence over questions of faith - which in a sense in fact partly informs the universalist argument - as by the inconsistencies of any unilinear, religious, theories of the national crises which inform these works and the surrounding discourse of which they engender. The nature of Egonu's nationalism, defined by a self-constructed Africanism, of course consigns both Christianity and Islam to the area of the alien and suspicious. The history which these religions embody is irreconcilable with anti-colonial cultural nationalism, even if, as in the case of Egonu, and in Achebe's work, the apprehension of this history is not reductionist. There is no question at all of a more favourable predilection to either religion, or of employing either religion, as a specific faith, to represent a particular positive concept such as solace or refuge. What we see in "Sanctuary in the Chapel" is not the valorisation or sanction of Christianity, or a counterpoise of one religion against another, but the proposition of a mediative institution within the frames of the continued, doxical nationalisation of icons.

If we accept this, then, it could be said that while in the process of conflict and affliction within the artist's community his concern changed from that of preservation of the nation to that of the urgency of the human condition, this did not mean a rejection of nationalism in favour of sectarianism. Even when, in 1967, the vision of

a preserved nation suffered through the break up of Nigeria, nationalism had the option of a new, emergent nation state to which, in fact, Egonu, partly thanks to relocation, never offered total allegiance [we have noted in an earlier chapter the biographical entry in the catalogue to The World in Perspective in 1967, described him as "born in Biafra (Eastern Nigeria)", pointing to the same ambivalence of nationality which, as has been argued, partly inspired the anxiety over imminent collapse of the nation which we see in the early ecumenicals.]

If the late ecumenicals, like "Sanctuary", progressively move the artist's agitation away from the idealism of preserving the nation, the subsequent works subdue the ecumenical argument altogether. In "Mother and Child" [1966] the artist gives up the discourse of "spiritual protection" and moves on to the reality of battle and the miseries of war. In what must be considered a masterpiece of the discourse of war as well as perhaps one of the artist's finest works, he not only signifies the irreconcilability of war and the idealist/metaphysical, the futility of spiritual, ecumenical argument in the face of war, he also deftly compresses the questions of conflict, war, insecurity and annihilation into one composition. "Mother and Child" is a complete doxa, if any discourse can be complete.

The painting is dominated by the image of a Mother and child in a roadside ticket. The two figures are in a state of discernible shock, the mother hiding her face behind that of her child. The situation is one of extreme agitation - she could be weeping. She encloses her child protectively. In this location, she would be protecting her from physical violence, a threat which hovers menacingly by all the same, since both figures are not properly hidden from the cause of their agitation and fright. In the upper left corner, in a bright clearing which could be a deserted road, a duel is

on between two male figures, one dressed partly in red [his hair is equally red, that of his opponent blue]. The opponent with blue hair is also partly dressed in blue. The red figure towers above the blue who is down on one knee. The gesture is clearly one of momentary loss of ground, but not of submission. The warrior is not fallen, only falling, and with one knee bent as if to signal rising, his other hand bears a gesture of imminent showing. On the contrary, the towering figure in red is showing looking down on the falling duellist, but his knees are partly bent, and so his body, as if, having received an unexpected blow, he is in the process of an anguished doubling-over. From his other side sticks out an object like a club which is not in use at the moment of portrayal.

This leaves the possibility of another reading. The presence of the harmful object, even in inertia, signifies the possibility of use, before or after. The figure in red could be pulling up his victim for the final blow, or dragging him away, ready to employ the club or gun. Perhaps it is this frightening possibility which explains the anguished apprehension of the mother and child. By choosing this particular moment rather than showing the act clearly in progress, by leaving room for uncertainty and thus for anxiety, the artist avoids sensational cliches of representation, same as he does by employing images of faceless people in everyday clothing rather than uniformed soldiers. Signification here is at its pure level, discourse at its most philosophical. The artist emphasises that war is about conflict and confrontation, not about soldiers, and the dialectics of conflict and confrontation, the reverberations, go beyond the fall of cities and death in the trenches to that of simple human terror, the torture and warp of the human soul. In the painting the eyes of the child are shut tight in absolute terror, that terror every child who goes through war learns to live

with. Because the process of accepting or conquering this terror invariably robs the child of tenderness and feeling, as studies of the Palestinian Intifadah or the insurrections in Apartheid South Africa have shown, a generation grows up with a diminished appreciation of human worth. A generational cycle of violence is instituted. The children of the Sharpeville Massacre of 1960 grow up to perpetrate the inner-community township violence of the 1980s and 1990s, just as children of the Great Wars grow up to order the annihilation of the Iraqi.

In essence, not only is the artist concerned for the sacredness and security of human lives, he is also concerned for the future of his community, the nation, in whatever form it survives. Not only do children need protection from the physical violence of conflicts and war, they must also be protected from the traumas which embed a psychotic predilection for violence and threaten, much more than the immediate costs of war, the future of the community and nation. In a sense, also, the artist's apprehension has been borne out historically by the particularly violent temperament of Nigeria's war-children, described by a Nigerian magazine a few years ago as "The Dare-devils", who today have taken urban violence to unprecedented levels.[37]

By ignoring orthodox signifiers of war and conflict, the artist steers contemplation clear of the simplistic and places at the core of discourse the centrality of the human element. To represent conflict and confrontation with guns and armaments, or with striding and falling soldiers, is to be reductionist. To present it as a duel without the obscuring diversions of machinery is to keep it close to the basic questions, the problematic of human relations, the idiosyncrasies of human dispositions, the element of personal interests, the enormously significant but oft

ignored element of the individual ego.

Conflict is projected in its true dimension as a human phenomenon, not a match of weapons or armies. And we are made to understand the political economy of conflict not simply in terms of the material causes or repercussions, not even merely in the immediate human costs - what America now qualifies as "collateral" losses - but in the damage to the young who constitute the future and soul of a group. More significant than some of his later paintings on the miseries of war, and indeed more significant than Achebe's, similarly titled, prize-winning poem on the same conflict, "Madonna and Child",[38] Egonu's "Mother and Child" returns the discourse of confrontation to its human foundations and addresses a dimension seldom examined, the relationship between conflict and the psychology and cyclicity of violence.

Another very significant element in this work is its analysis of the gender structure of conflict. Perhaps more than any other work on conflict, with the exception of Picasso's "Guernica", "Mother and child" addresses gender relations and draws attention to the maleness of confrontation, which is manifest not necessarily in the male domination of armies and battles but in the specific gender nature of state power which is the true cause and protagonist of conflict. Without positing absolute gender distinctions, the artist raises the discourse of sex relations, and notes that in circumstances of social distress the weight of such distress falls not on the men who decide and pursue war, but mostly on women and children, those who contribute least to the politics of conflict and the perpetration of confrontation. Without the distracting sensationalism of "Guernica", "Mother and child" draws up a gender scale of conflict, an area feminist agitators and ideologues have hardly directed their

attention towards, precisely because feminist discourse originated and has remained within a society and generation with no immediate experience of war at home.

The paintings and sculptures of the war years, 1967-1970, all touch on these question, but never again in such precise and holistic terms. Other paintings from 1966 like "Bombed House" and "Battle" work within the same frame, but do not evoke the same comprehensive confrontations with the phenomenon of conflagration as "Mother and child", with its cliched title, does. And the universalism, the "humanism" of this discourse the artist consciously re-emphasised by freeing the figures of racial-specificity, by living their skin blank, neither white nor black but blank.

After the philosophical submissions of "Mother and child", as war finally broke out officially in Nigeria, effectively redefining 'nation', the artist does not abandon his commitment to 'nation', as argued earlier, but goes into what Aijaz Ahmad has described as the "nationalism of mourning", no longer a contemplation of what imperialism did to the colonies but of "what we ourselves had done, were still doing, in one way or another, to our own polity."[39]

Also, a certain element of hysteria entered his imagery especially as the fighting became fiercer and figures became available of the level of human loss recorded in the course of the conflict. In his allegorical paintings the Daumierian metaphor of war and death, the skeleton, replaced the human figure. The artist's awareness of the danger of sensationalism and his efforts to keep clear of it shows in his initial choice of metaphors for this stage of work. As in the beginning of the apocalyptic phase, he began with non-human metaphors in such paintings as "The End of a Sheep", and "End of a Tree", works which, textually, signify a continuing dedication to 'nation' in his concern. In these works,not only do the metaphors stand

for the annihilation of people, they stand even more appropriately for the demise of the new nation, if with an apocalyptic finality. The felled tree in "End of a Tree", it is important to note, is felled not by machinery but with teeth, another signifier for the human element at the foundations of conflict discussed above. The culprit here is a rodent, shown in pattern behind the tree, its teeth located at the base of the tree. One discernible argument of this representation is that the roots of conflict are never hidden, and are ever-present. The threat of conflict, disintegration, demise, are constants for a people or nation.

Yet the discourse then moves from the philosophical contemplation of conflict to one of lamentation. A certain woeful agitation enters the paintings. Representation is no longer contemplation, in fact, but mourning, an appeal to the world to take note and act, a cause. The role here is no more one of leading the viewer to an understanding of the crisis but making him or her empathise with those involved, projecting the reality in concrete terms. The artist shifts from observer to active campaigner, from chronicler to agitator.

Egonu gave his 1968 exhibition at the Upper Grosvenor Galleries in London, *The World in Perspective,* to this purpose. Not only did he appeal with his imagery, with the human skeleton as the leitmotif, he did so too with such titles as "Thirty Thousand", "Blind Eye to Tragedy", "No Place for the Weak", and so on. "Blind Eye to Tragedy" [1967] is a direct response to the international indifference to suffering in Biafra, especially the suspect role of the British government. It is a bitter painting, and again the artist employs the image of mother and child. In this case, though, the woman and child are direct victims not of the traumas of war but of its physical violence. To direct attention to the specific and brutal peculiarities of the war against

Biafra, Egonu creates the ultimate fiction of carnage and savagery: a lynched mother and child. He does not spare us the horror of this situation as he takes us through the history of the incident, showing us not merely figures tied to a tree but figures lynched and abandoned to rot. The skeleton of the woman leans forward, with that of the child still clinging unto it, as the body rots and the ropes on her hands snap. We are shown part of the flesh sticking to the lynch tree, and in what looks like a nightmare at dawn, the two figures are thrown into highlight by a pale, blue sky. Nothing in the entire artistic response to the war, whether by Uche Okeke, Obiora Udechukwu, Chuks Anyanwu, or even in its literature, comes close to the power of this painting, and only in Goya can we find images approaching this level of bitterness.

In leaning over the skeleton of the woman does not fall or droop. Her hand does not hang by her side. Instead, the fingers are unnaturally placed on her forehead. The signification here is of course not naturalistic, yet there is an added meaning to this gesture, an indication both of lamentation, which in life such gesture would signify, and defiance, which in death it does.

The artist pursues his gender perspective on war in this painting. The true horrors of the conflict are not played out on the battle fields but in the lives of women and children. The war is not one of arms and soldiers but one of attrition, not one of victories in the battlefield but one of a slow annihilation of a group. Significantly, the rest of the war was played out exactly on these terms beginning with the economic blockade of the Republic of Biafra which introduced, reportedly for the first time in the history of warfare in Africa, strategic deprivation and starvation as instruments of war.

If we should extend reading, this painting defines 'tragedy' not only in terms of human collateral, but fits into the mourning of nation. The woman and the child are also the nation and its children, and tragedy here extends to the decimation of the new nation. By 1967, despite the element of ambivalence we noted above, Egonu, like other intellectuals from the persecuted Igbo group, had come to accept the new definitions of nation, and the nation mourned in "Blind Eye to Tragedy" and other paintings of the period is equally the disintegrating Nigerian nation as the threatened Biafra Republic. And the sign of defiance in "Blind Eye" applies both to the initial notion of nation, and the emergent. A paradox is in play. The emigre is divided in his loyalty, but it is not the particularities of this loyalty that matter as much as the uncertainties of the objects of his multiple allegiance.

By 1968 the artist reached his cross-roads. A small sculpture in plaster from *The World in Perspective* titled "Hopelessness" signifies the transformation of distress into despair [the artist has claimed that this and other sculptures in fact precede the war, but this cannot be substantiated since the works are not dated. Subsequent scholarship may be able to resolve this, and when the artist's papers are eventually accessible to researchers, they may shed light on the question.] Having made his contribution to the war effort, the artist, now possessed of a sense of futility, returns to philosophical contemplation. Again, this transition is marked with the return of animal imagery

In "No Place for the Weak" [1968], the valediction to this phase of his work, the artist poses two animals of indeterminate species locked in a fatal duel. The colour-symbolic schema of "Mother and child", the use of red and, this time, green and white for the duellists, is again employed to denote aggressor and aggressed. The

aggressor is red, the aggressed green and white, and partly skeletal. The situation of dialogic combat posited in "Mother and Child" is abandoned for absolutes of victory and vanquish as the red beast embeds its teeth in the neck of the other animal. Clear power relations are also established here, with the strong triumphal over the weak. The artist seems to have come to a resolution, concluding his discourse of conflict by positing the invariable synonymisation of strength and victory. The idealism of the ecumenicals yields to the realism of the dialectic of power, evident in the reality of confrontation. Conflicts are decided not on moral grounds or those of universal, inalienable rights, but on the concrete platform of strength. The painting does not make a value judgement, it simply states one man's percolation of reality through experience, and with it the artist adds to his theses on conflict and war.

"Two Fighting Cocks", from the same period, is conceived on a more analytical level. The metaphor of fighting cocks alludes to the Nigerian conflict, and in choosing this particular metaphor, the artist directs attention to the underlying nature of cock-fighting, a metaphor of eloquent presence in the work of Latin American writer Gabriel Garcia Marquez. Under scrutiny cock-fighting presents many elements relevant to any discourse around violence, conflict, disintegration, and Poor World nations. On the surface a cock-fight is brutal, bloody, fatal, and locked. Once in the cock-pit the two animals are bound inextricably to battle till one of them is dead. The pit is therefore a deterministic, inescapable circle/cycle of suicidal confrontation, broken only by the ultimate decimation of one or both combatants. On this level, cock-fighting appropriates the cycle of Poor World violence, hedged in and determined not necessarily by the internal dynamics of social resolution within these nations, but more often by the machinations and structures of West. This

introduces the significance of the political economy of cock-fighting, the fact that the sport is both sponsored and manipulated to arouse and exploit the combatants's weakness of suicidal predilection for the cock fighter's benefit. The fighting cock itself appropriates the emergent nation-state, still tethered umbilically to the Empire through economic dependence. The cock fighter raises the cock and so owns it, and he raises it for one purpose, for economic self-interest. The suicidal combat of fighting cocks is therefore insinuated, staged, and manipulated by the cock owner. In the same way the decimation of a cock in the pit is of interest to somebody, so are the intermittent conflicts in Poor World nations in someone else's positive interest. The political economy of Poor World conflict works beyond the frames of orthodox morality or universal humanism, thus the "blind eye" which its instigators show to its repercussions.

In the simple image of two fighting cocks Egonu is able to summarise the phenomenon of Poor World conflicts and their place in international relations and politics. Without specificity to region or case, conflicting non-Western nations are revealed as mere fatalist puppets in someone else's bloody sport, driven to self-decimation in someone else's interest. In the Nigerian case, it is known that the war between Nigeria and Biafra could have been aborted early in the conflict if not for the manipulations of Britain which gained enormously from its continued perpetration through arms sales, oil deals with the Nigerian government, and the export of mercenaries.

In its analytical sharpness and metaphorical precision "Two Fighting Cocks" stands beside any great studies of violence and war in the so-called "Third World" today, and there are few paintings in history which have aspired in this direction, or

succeeded.

In 1969 Egonu began a new phase of the war paintings, returning fully to the philosophical in the series, "War and Peace" which he concluded in 1972. In 1970 he painted another study of the flight of the Igbo from other parts of Nigeria at the onset of conflicts in 1966. While the first study, "Flight" [1966] alluded to the biblical flight of the Virgin and Child to Egypt, the second is a less allusive, less robust stretch of the imagination which pulls in the concrete chaos and bleakness of the episode.

Egonu's war works constitute a major body of his oeuvre and, from our reading, a formidable study in the psychology and political economy of Poor World Conflict, the like of which can only be found in literature. The war works provide exceptional insight into the personality and anxieties of the emigre, the ambivalences of his definition of nation, and, perhaps more importantly, they throw light on the meaning and concreteness of community to the emigre and new national. From a romantic rudder to a specific concept and reality, community takes shape in response to historical exigences both in the host society and in the emigre's home, and when these historical imperatives demand it, the emigre realises concretely, his role as emissary of the home community, even as he expands the borders of his vision and individual allegiances.

The Nigeria-Biafra conflict occupies a most significant place in Egonu's work and life. In an interview a few years ago he revealed that indeed it is believed by his wife that the origins of his critical state of health from the eighties must be found in the war years.[40] They have continued to occupy him, surfacing again and again in such works as "First Return after the Exodus" and "Second Return after Exodus"

[1974], and in strong memories. The war years decisively defined aspects of the Egonu aesthetic, and his subsequent work has manifested a consciousness of community in terms not initially clearly defined. His work is not determinately tied to the collective. In the spectrality of its themes, his art defies circumvention by any frames, including those of community. But the war years and the work they produced laid the foundation for a concreteness in the definition of art, the artist, and his calling, a concreteness which runs through all of his career and in phases resumes the specificity of dedication to the role of emissary and visionary. This role he returns to in the *Addiction* series [1970], *Stateless People* [1980-1982], and *Will Knowledge Safeguard Freedom*? [1985-1988].

Notes

1. Critical literature on this is vast and in the seventies thediscourse expanded into such other questionable constructs as 'Commitment and the Third World Writer', 'Commonwealth Literature' and so on. Peter Nazareth, Alastair Niven, Gerald Moore, are some of the authorities in these fields. In the visual arts this has manifested in such constructs as Susan Vogel's 'New Functionality'.

2. Leopold Sedar Senghor, *Prose and Poetry*, selected and trans. by John Reed and Clive Wake [London: Oxford University Press, 1965] p. 82.

3. Chinua Achebe, *Morning Yet on Creation Day* [London: Heinemann, 1975] p. 19.

4. Regents' Lecture, University of California at Los Angeles, 1984. Later published in *Hopes and Impediments: Selected Essays 1965-87* [London: Heinemann, 1988] pp. 32-41.

5. Wole Soyinka, *Art, Dialogue and Outrage: Essays on Literature and Culture* [Ibadan: New Horn Press, 1988] p. 16.

6. Dambudzo Marechera, joint winner of the 1979 Guardian Fiction Prize, was one who held most strongly that the artist must be sole master of his own creative allegiances, and indeedthat there are no allegiances oustside of that which the artist has to himself. See Flora Veit-Wield, *Dambudzo Marechera 1952-87* [Harare: Baobab Books, 1988]

7. Peter Fuller, *Beyond the Crisis in Art* [London: Writers and Readers Ltd, 1980] pp. 98-103

8. Wole Soyinka, *Myth, Literature and the African World* [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1976] p. 61.

9. Molara Ogundipe-Leslie in Soyinka, *Art, Dialogue, Outrage*, p. 113.

10. Soyinka, ibid., p. 113.

11. Interviews with the artist, South Kenton, November 1990.

12. Chinua Achebe, *Morning Yet*, p. 19.

13. Bharati Mukherjee, *Darkness*, [Ontario: Penguin Books, 1985] p. 32.

14. Achebe has indeed expressed his wish that "the word 'universal' be banned altogether from discussions of African literature until such a time as people cease to use it as a synonym for the narrow, self-serving parochialism of Europe". Achebe, 'Colonialist Criticism', *Hopes and Impediments*, p. 52.

15. See also Achebe, 'Thoughts on The Nigerian Novel', *Dalhousie Review*, Vol. 53, No. 4, December 1973; also published in Achebe, *Morning Yet*, pp. 49-54.

16. Ibid., p.40.

17. Achebe, *Morning Yet*, p. 19.

18. Much of the information on these details of the Spanish struggle are from Pablo Neruda, *Memoirs*, trans. Hardie St. Martin [London: Penguin Books, 1978]

19. Emmanuel Ngara,'Achebe as Artist: The Place and Significance of Anthills of the Savannah', in Peterson and Rutherford, eds., *Chinua Achebe: A Celebration* [London/ Sydney: Heinemann and Dangaroo Press, 1991] p. 113.

20. Ibid.

21. Achebe, *Hopes and Impediments*, p. 43.

22. Ngugi wa Thiong'o, *Homecoming: Essays on African and Caribbean Literature, Culture and Politics* [London: Heinemann, 1972] pp. 127-144.

23. George Lamming, *Of Age and Innocence* [London: Joseph, 1958] p.73.

24. Uzo Egonu, interviews, October 1989.

25. Interviews, October 1989.

26. Derek Walcott, *Selected Poems*, [New York, 1964]

27. Raymond Williams, *The Year 2000* [New York: Pantheon Books, 1983]

28. See Frantz Fanon on 'The Pitfalls of National Consciousness' in *The Wretched of the Earth*, trans. Constance Farrington [Middlesex: Penguin Books, 1967]

29. Betty Nickers, ed., *Chi: Letters from Biafra* [Toronto: New Press, 1970] p. 36. Also A. B. Akinyemi, *The British Press and the Nigerian Civil War: The Godfather Syndrome* [Ibadan: University Press, 1979]

30. Akinyemi, ibid., p. 7.

31. Basil Davidson, 'Peace at Stake in Battle of Nigerian Poll', Daily Mirror, 30 December 1964.

32. Christopher Okigbo, *Path of Thunder: Poems Prophesying War in Collected Poems* [London: William Heinemann Ltd, 1986]

33. Roland Barthes, *The Pleasure Of The Text* [New York: Hill and Wang, 1975]

34. Egonu, *The World in Perspective*, catalogue of exhibition, 1968.

35. Mohamed Boudiaf in *Time* magazine, Jan. 27, 1992, p. 29.

36. Timothy Brennan, *Salman Rushdie and The Third World* [London:Macmillan, 1989] p. 18.

37. *African Concord*, Vol. 4, No.29, 13 Nov. 1989.

38. Chinua Achebe, *Beware Soul Brother*, [Enugu: Nwamife Publishers, 1971]

39. Aijaz Ahmad, "Jameson's Rhetoric of Otherness and the 'National Allegory'", *Social Text*, Vol.17, Fall 1987, pp. 3- 25.

40. Conversation with the writer, South Kenton, 1990.

Chapter Six

COMMUNITY AND COMMITMENT

Beyond The Agonies of War

If in the war works Egonu re-establishes his claim to community by defining nationality, and in making this definition takes us through the complex and prevaricated processes of emergent Poor World nationhood, the loss of the war signals a momentary break in what may be considered a period of essential parochialism, and moves the artist on to other engagements. War works on the individual in several ways. It shrinks and shrivels the persona and the world, driving the individual and community back into themselves while blocking out the rest of reality and history. The exigencies of war and the siege mentality of the embattled and threatened reduce time to the moment, and the world to the immediate theatre of confrontation. Community is focused, if stringently so, and concerns constricted. This is at the level of intense, involved response.

On the other hand, an ambiguous, fairly detached response to war produces the universalist and humanist persona, sometimes genuine, at others merely escapist, which strives to soar above the parochialism of strife and conflict, and to construct a world community, the community of human brotherhood. The individual is disgusted and consequently alienated by the folly and gruesomeness of war, and in struggling to dissociate himself from this, he also dissociates himself from all who are involved. In effect he denounces and disowns the space which engages in the lowly

and inhuman business of war, and creates or identifies himself with a greater community, a larger humanity, a brotherhood of all men above the staining pettiness of confrontations and battles. Against the narrow-mindedness of patriotism is erected the supposed large-heartedness of universalism; against the nationalist's constricted definition of community, the humanist's seamlessness.

As we saw in the last chapter the ambivalence of Egonu's nationalism, and indeed of the new national of the former colony, are drawn out by the very ambivalence of the new nation itself as it metamorphoses, expanding, retracting, re-expanding, geopolitically and economically, in essence wriggling within the ropes of the colonial ring and trying to forge, and come to terms with, its own identity. While Egonu would not fit into our extreme of the narrow-minded patriot whose sense of community is held within the hedges of the fatherland [the classic community of Nationalism, and Fascism], given that his commitment to nation is shown to be neither extreme, absolute, uncritical, nor given, he remains far from the self-righteous, alienated and rootless universalist whose community is a seamless Humanity. The intermittent expansion and retraction of his "community" during the war, from the borders of one independent nation to another, from Nigeria to Biafra to humanity at the moment of despair, and back to Nigeria, underlines that for him community, while not being shapeless and seamless, is never-the-less not a concrete and shiftless concept or reality, that it is indeed not a Reality, in absolute terms, but a fabrication, just like the individual identity. Community is therefore a creation of the individual just as much as he is in turn a creation of community, and the individual is tethered to nation just as loosely as the nation is tethered to the individual, each free at will to breach the loose contract of loyalty and identification between them, to distance,

indeed sever where necessary, itself from the other.

As the Nigeria-Biafra war dragged on in the face of international cynicism and collective inaction, and despair overtook Egonu's anguish and momentary agitationist nationalism, his focus within "the community" moved, exposing with it a wider definition of nation and community. As if to say Goodbye to all that, the war recedes into the background in his work and immediate preoccupation, especially after "Exodus" [1970], the valedictory painting of the war years. It is visible still, emerging intermittently over the coming years in different contexts and guises, but it is no longer at the centre. The pessimism of the last years carry into the aftermath. The artist seems to conclude, like most of his other country men, that ultimately History is written by the victor, and they were the vanquished.

What is most important, however, is that it is the war years which permanently transform the artist's disposition to engagement or commitment, and his level of sensitivity to reality. The war effectively and concretely moved the artist's commitment to community and self from the initial romanticism of the early naivist period to a realist apprehension. It would be right to argue, therefore, that indeed it was the war that made Egonu, and quite remarkably not only him but also a whole crop of his contemporaries in Nigeria, into "committed" artists. This transformation or maturation we find most remarkably in Uche Okeke and Obiora Udechukwu, the later recognised today as the leading figure in what has been described as the social realist school in Nigerian art. As Okeke put it in his speech, 'Art and Revolution' in 1968, war demands of art that it "takes on a new but different line of action. The dreamer must turn activist...".[1]

Not only did the war permanently affect the nature of the visual arts in

Nigeria, especially in the East, it equally affected literature. It was the crisis, as we hinted at in the last chapter, which ultimately transformed the poet Christopher Okigbo from the eccentric symboliste and dedicated classicist and autonomist into the romantic engagee artist he became, reaching the extremes of this category by not only producing one of the corner-pieces of committed work in 20th century African poetry, the *Path of Thunder* cycle, but also enlisting in the war and becoming one of its earliest casualties, as if to validate Okeke's radical contention that in times of threat the artist "must speak out with all the forces at his command, fight if he must and die in order to safeguard liberty and survival".[2] In Achebe the war had an even more far-reaching effect, sowing a most sinister cynicism in him which kept him from the novel for twenty-two years. What emerged at the end of this long regime of silence was the 1987 novel, *Anthills of the Savannah,* described as his angriest yet "wisest book to date".[3] Although Achebe had stood clearly from his first work as an artist of commitment with a unique sense of community, creating in his first novel a story in which he breaks the rules of the 'novel' by placing the community rather than the individual as protagonist,[4] it is his post-war novel that finally embodies the maturation of his communal vision.

The cessation of conflict and end of war are a period of stock-taking. They are also a period of philosophisation and sober reflection on not only the immediate past but also the general meaning of things, the configurations of reality. Concepts and convictions previously taken for granted, having gone into the grey passages of doubt and questioning, emerge somewhat reshaped. This metamorphosis could be positive or negative. They are strengthened or weakened, held steadfast or abandoned. The draining passions of war leave the individual at the edges of certainty, even in

victory. In some the bitterness of conflict and loss linger, and could destroy the artist and his art, just as the fall of Allende to the fascist right in Chile caused the poet Neruda heart break from which he died shortly, or as we have here stated, the Nigeria-Biafra war left Achebe incapable of writing a novel for twenty-two years. In others the transition is quick if never complete. The artist steps beyond tragedy and life goes on. His art may indeed be an elixir for the healing process, helping to transport him across the gulf of loss.

In Egonu's case the paintings of 1969 and 1970, culminating in the *War and Peace* series, formed his ascent over tragedy. If the world was determined in turning a "Blind Eye to Tragedy", then to go down with it, to be drowned in bitterness and pessimism, is to succumb to the ultimate defeat; the fall of the spirit and the death of faith. While others sought distraction and healing in other engagements, in academic work or research as in the case of Achebe, Uche Okeke, Obiora Udechukwu, Ossie Enekwe, Vincent Amaefuna and the entire body of artists and poets who held up the pillars of the defunct Biafra and dedicated their art to its survival, Egonu turned to painting, and in this to other preoccupations and duties to community. He philosophised over the phenomenon of war in the *War and Peace* series, and having reconciled himself to the reality of violence, subjugation, anguish and defeat, without giving up on the virtues and possibilities of a peaceful existence of peoples and nations, but even more importantly having analyzed and discovered the substructures of Poor World violence and national insecurity, he faced away unto other engagements.

The evening classes in printmaking which he took in 1970 not only fulfilled an old longing to acquire graphic techniques which the period at Camberwell did not

fully offer, part of this quest being the drawing classes he took at St. Martins in the early 1960s, it was also a way of struggling out of the war years by going into a work environment which offered a different kind of company. The company of artists and master printmakers at the Working Men's College in Camden not only helped direct his artistic preoccupations away from the bitterness of the war at home but kept his mind from it. Discussing art and making art, learning new techniques and trying out possibilities of craft and material, presented a new and different challenge which the artist enjoyed.

Out of this exercise came his first major body of post-war work, the brief 1970 portfolio of five lithographs which he called *Addiction 1-5*. The Addiction series begin with "Addiction One", a stark mono-lithograph in an edition of 70 which, in its starkness, recall not the immediately preceding work of the war years but the paintings and drawings of the immediate post-bridge period in the mid-sixties. Its circular composition alludes to the 1965 painting, 'Picadilly Circus', and the 1970 'Exodus'. Formalistically, "Addiction One" is a particularly conservative lithograph, conceived and executed on very traditional lines as transferred, mass produced drawing, very much in the tradition of master printmaking. The lithograph could well have been a transferred painting or drawing - this writer has no knowledge of a master-drawing or painting for the work. The artist tries to capture in chiaroscuro a semblance of the variegated texture and patterning of his paintings. The major elements in the lithograph are a prominent bottle of wine, and two leaves of indeterminate species. Slightly off the centre of the composition is an element with the semblance of a glass or cup. Extending from the wine bottle and terminating in the bottom right of the lithograph is a spider web, a most apt metaphor for addiction.

To the upper left side of the print is a configuration of a human face, laid down in rather cryptic form and discernible only through the suggestion of very residual facial features, two eyes, a nostril line, and a mouth out of which issues a form resembling a pipe but which turns out as the stalk and terminates as the midrib of one of the broad leaves earlier mentioned. At the bottom centre is a pattern which evokes the form of a roulette, although this reading may well be pushing the text. Between the wine bottle and the broader of the leaves is a textured section which, though it may be purely decorative, equally evokes the form of crushed tobacco leaves. This interpretation is reinforced in the second print in the series in which a faceless figure is shown leaning over a similarly stippled section and making a clearing in it with his/her hand, as if to gather, just as our inference of a human face here is borne out by the minimalist suggestion of a face in "Addiction Two" by the use of partial features; an eye, a nostril, half a skull and one ear.

The most direct references in this print are the leaves, the wine bottle, and the spider web, so that within the picture, even barring the decoding of any other signs, a structure of statement is already constructed: addiction to alcohol and drugs. Pushed as we suggested, it is quite possible to argue that in "Addiction One" the artist summarises the statement of the entire series by making reference to the major addictions addressed in the rest of the prints: addiction to gambling, alcohol, drugs, and indulgence. In "Addiction One" the central sign, the principal metaphor which is the spider web, symbol of entanglement, loss of direction, imprisonment, and imminent destruction or consumption, is laid down and does not reappear in the rest of the series. It appears at the beginning as a pre-text, a folio cover sign, and

establishes the direction and concern of the body of work.

In "Addiction Two" the figural presence is more fully realised, two human figures discernible from the composition. One of the figures, positioned right at the middle of the print, leans over a space, a table or floor covered with indeterminate substance which, as suggested above, evokes the form of crushed tobacco or other such material. The figure is absorbed in clearing or arranging this substance - the deep absorption of the action is underlined by the posture of the figure and again by his/her facelessness. Although the head of the figure, leaning over the space full front, and in this position consequently buried between the shoulders, slightly suggests femininity by the arrangement of the coiffeur, a genderlessness is indeed more strongly implied.

Although these prints are severely minimalist, there is still a pattern in Egonu's representations which would not be out of place here were it intended that gender be reflected. The presentation of a coiffeur that suggests femininity without the Egonu sign of the feminine gender, the suggested breast cup or nippled curve, increases the ambiguities of gender and in so doing invalidates it. The figure to the right, as already noted, is partially realised, giving away no solid personality or presence. In the figure's hand, though, is a bottle. Below the figure, who is reclining, is the suggestion of a car body and wheel, realised just so much as to make it discernible and impressionable. The reference here, could be to possession or use, to a craze for cars or the abuse of cars through drink-driving. It may also suggest not a car at all but a wheelchair, and through this an entire string of situations which it is not directly important that we pursue here.

To the left of the picture is a more remote but very important, purely

structural signification. The patterning of the composition is disjointed along a long diagonal from the bottom left to the top, creating a very prominent fault. Although this line is replicated slightly to the right, effectively dividing the composition in three and providing space for the central figure while equally locating the other figure in its own space, the fault on the left is re-emphasised by the occurrence of a bull's eye form dead on its centre, calling attention not only to the bull's eye but more importantly to the fault itself.

The fault in "Addiction Two", on a very surface level, creates the semblance of steps or stairs, on which the figure in the centre is located. Pursued at this level one may think of door-step tramps and rough-sleepers, of the destitute crackhead. There is nothing concrete in the print to substantiate this reading, much as there is not much to suggest any other. On what might be taken as a deeper level, however, the fault could be read conceptually as sign of the disjunction, the disruption and dislocation which addiction causes, that snap in the addict's life when he looses control of his world and submits to - landslides into - the addictive element. If the other elements in the print are therefore descriptive, and by extension narrative, the fault is the sign of discourse, the element of analytical summation. The fault, which indeed visually replicates the geological split which results in a landslide, the pattern it creates in the picture resembling a cross section of a faulted earth chore, is the sign of rupture, and a fall. And like the web, the initial conceptual motif, it never reappears in the rest of the series.

"Addiction Three" reintroduces colour to the artist's work and sets the stage for his eventual foray into silk screen printing with which he would produce some of the most visually arresting and appealing works in his entire oeuvre. The print,

one may venture to suggest, is simpler for reading, since it addresses mainly one form of addiction, gambling. A number of suggested figures are shown engaged in the absorbing preoccupation of a game of cards. But for the hands of the figures, and the cards, nothing else is given away. To the right of the composition an ambiguity is generated by the depiction of three hands issuing conjecturably from one body. Observed more closely, the form on the right suggests two heads, one hidden in the blue body and cloak of the form, the other cut out by the same body but existing only as a cut-out, an absence, in the negative shape which the body defines.

In the rest of the series the composition is progressively simpler, the suggestion of figural element much stronger and definable. The fourth print deals again with alcohol and drugs, and figures are shown either injecting or sharing drugs. One figure is shown in a posture of supplication and submission, kneeling before two giant bottles as if in offering. The fifth print, "Addiction Five", shows an indulgent party with a table full of food. The colourfulness of the third and fourth prints is replaced by a greyness which is sedate as it is simple.

In all the prints one recurring element is the facelessness of the suggested figural presences, beginning with the partial suggestion in the first print. The element of facelessness, the anonymisation of the human element in these prints, works at two levels. First, it focuses attention on the theme of the prints rather than on the surface representation. In other words it emphasises the metaphorical rather than the representational, the conceptual rather than the narrative. Signification is direct and stark without the possibility of derailment through the intervention of the mimetic narrative. With a few key signs, the viewer is led straight to the intent of the picture, even if within this intent ambivalences and ambiguities exist. At least any such

ambiguities are contained within a specific frame of reference which summarily presents the theme of the work. In a sense, between the verbosity of prose and the stringent austerity of poetry, the artist chooses the later, thus avoiding the weaknesses and indeterminacies of the pictorial.

If one should compare, for instance, "Addiction Five" which is a dining scene with, say, Van Gogh's 'Potato Eaters' or, even more appropriately, Edouard Manet's 'Luncheon on the Grass', one immediately observes the effect of Egonu's technique of signification in these prints. While the pictorial technique in the latter works leave room for reading and interpretation independent of whatever their original intents were, in the Egonu print this is considerably precluded because there is indeed no "picture", no story. There is no array of representations which could possibly detract from the central trope. While one could say in the Manet picture; this figure is possibly this personality, perhaps Manet's brother or Manet himself, and the lady sitting there is that other personality, and the appearance of the lady bathing her feet in the background is an allusion to this or that scene, and so on, the striving for essence in the Egonu print cuts this out while keeping the work essentially figurative. The technique is closer to that of the mass media, the advertisement, which must lead the reader to its meaning straight and without detraction. And this stringence of essence is, in itself, a carry over from the austere style of the war paintings.

On another level the technique of partial effacement or anonymisation in the prints fits them into the pattern of the late war works, especially from the period of despair when the artist shifted to the questions of humanity rather than nation, or from the *War and Peace* series which continued the artist's period of philosophisation. In other words, not only does the muting of the human figure point attention in the

direction of the problem or intent, it is equally significant that in whatever whittled, disjointed or residual form, it is persistently present. This provides the sub-line that the problem is ultimately a "human" problem, one which is not completely stated or sufficiently emphasised without reference to the human element, the centre, subject and object, of discourse. In anonymising the figures even when they are considerably wholly realised as in "Addiction Five", the artist effaces the specific identity and expands his community. This is no longer a Nigerian problem, or a Biafran problem, not even merely a black problem, but a human problem.

Yet again, in momentarily retracting from the demands of intense emotional involvement in the crises of nation and home, what the artist faces towards is at once an outward, human path as it is a purely personal and internal one. The gesture is not necessarily one of "broadening" out but of withdrawing, retracting, personally defining the borders of creative commitment and its community. Perhaps to imply that the artist expands his community here is to put it wrongly because the problem addressed is one that affects the inner community just as much as it affects the larger humanity. In other words when we read a turn of attention to the "outside" in the *Addiction* series, we are merely playing into the trap of the universalist school by first denying the universal relevance of the entirety of the war works, and second by seeing a redefinition of community where there is none. What gives room for ambiguities here is that by effacing the humans in the prints the artist plants an ambivalence as far as the framework of community is applied to the works.

It is safe to argue that the artist does not depart from the community already defined in his earlier work, but merely deals with problems which cannot, as in this series, be regionalised. Thus their relevance applies not only to his own community

but equally to any other, not only to his own people but to all people. What is transcended in these prints by the nature of its subject is not only the specific boundaries of the artist's immediate community but also class strata and delineations.

The period of the Addiction series is of course the beat age, the heyday of addiction, space experience, drugs, rock and television, a period of global violence and desperation, much as it was, simultaneously, one of vulgar indulgences. Advances in technology made sure that no patch of the earth was secure from the plague. It is a period of global cynicism, the withering away of the civil rights momentum, the disgrace of messianic America and loss of faith in civilisation and the great white mission. The new nation states of Africa are in turmoil, and around the world governments rise as quickly as they fall. Youth are in distress. Western modernism is at its end and this is marked by extreme masochism and the demise of vision. Nothing seems to have survived the Great Question, Why?

The *Addiction* series rise above this cynicism, the cynicism and melodrama with which, on the contrary, Allen Ginsberg's *Howl*, for instance, deals with the same problem.[5] In this more than anything else, perhaps, lies its element of true commitment. That the artist avoids the forms and approaches of the zeitgeist also effectively locates him outside its space which is the mainstream, and its society. He neither subverts discourse nor dismisses it, neither ridicules it nor obliterates it. He merely posits it at the centre. That he takes a side is only relevant to us to the extent that it shows his freedom from the cynicism of the moment, and in so doing also shows an artist of concern rather than a disinterested one, an artist of commitment rather than an autonomist.

In their stark signification, the prints move from the suggestive to the blunt, all the time pointing to the "problematic" of addiction. The fault in "Addiction Two" points to the disjuncture in the addict's personality and his eventual fall, the facelessness of the figures to the loss of self, which the loss of discipline and self-control implies. As a body the prints deal, in a particularly pointed fashion, with a problem which is rarely the subject matter of much art.

After an interregnum which spanned the whole of the seventies during which Egonu occupied himself with such less needling concerns as religion, and also produced his wittier works which look at the lighter frivolities of the human condition, while occasionally pulling up the war in the continuous and gradual process of exorcism, his partial blindness between 1979 and 1983 returned him to angst and the contemplative mood. It was during this period of helplessness and uncertainty, working under painfully trying circumstances, that he again faced his mind to the questions of nation, and produced a new series of philosophicals disturbingly titled *Stateless People.*

By 1980 when he began *Stateless People,* Egonu had lived in England for forty years, a long period during which he had moved through several phases of life, ambition, aspiration and dreams personal and visionary; from the heat and passion of the independence movement years to the early days of jubilant nationhood, through the agonizing moment when all the glorious visions seemed to come to naught as the civil war raged and brother turned against brother, destroying rather than building, obliterating rather than advancing. The cessation of hostilities and the post-war reconciliations in Nigeria brought a new period of renewed hope and visions of growth and progress. This of course partly explains that Egonu's

preoccupations after the war were no longer contemplations of nation and vision in the manner of the war years or the period shortly before, as we saw above. The promise of a new beginning at home left him room to explore other concerns, even to indulge occasionally in what Barthes would call "the pleasure of the text".

The Nigerian oil boom placed the country in the centre of the Black world, the strongest, wealthiest nation in Black Africa. Coupled with this new status was the elating rhetoric of its leaders who pledged that "Africa is the center piece" of the nation's foreign policy. Egonu recalls the period with a mixture of nostalgia and anguish, how Nigerians and by association Africans and Black people in Europe could hold their head high and be counted. "From their airport hotels they could buy up whole shops on the phone, and wherever you went, people went out of their way to attend to you if you were Nigerian".[6]

Grand visions and grand projects, what came to be known as "white elephants", were all part of this brush with greatness. One such project was the 1977 FESTAC with which Nigeria tried to live up to its assumed image and position among African peoples. At the end of his term in office in 1979, the military Head of State confidently projected that "Nigeria will become one of the ten leading nations in the world by the end of the century".[7]

With time, however, it was clear that the leader's boasts, just like the nation's gigantean image, were more delusion than genuine vision. The period of Nigeria's boom was characterised by hyper-consumerism rather than productivity or concrete infrastructural development. No solid foundations were being laid for the country. No meaningful investments were in place. On the contrary, corruption and decadence set in and boomed. By 1983 when the country came close to collapse for the second

time in its short life as a nation, the situation had grown so critical that Achebe, in an unusual outburst of irate pamphleteering, stated starkly: "Corruption in Nigeria has passed the alarming and entered the fatal stage; and Nigeria will die if we keep pretending that she is only slightly indisposed".[8] That year the country careered into chaos, the civilian president confessing the imminence of anarchy. By the end of the year the Second Republic had collapsed.

After its fall from grace and the failure of its expensive experiment in Western-style democracy, Nigeria entered a period of retributive military dictatorship, corrective in its declared mission but acutely repressive and lacking in vision. The Great Hope of the Black world had again failed.

The period of Egonu's partial blindness between 1979 and 1983, which coincided with the period of Nigeria's chaotic and farcical experiment with Western democracy, was thus one of anguish not merely physical but equally spiritual. With a failing physical vision and a failing national vision confronting him, it was time again for the artist to bring his life and history under scrutiny, to put "the World in Perspective" with the clarity and essential sobriety which imminent failure brings.

On the face of it *Stateless People* is not a particularly unique body of work. Formalistically, the paintings fall into same pattern as the colour screen-prints of the late seventies and early eighties, with large, flat areas, fewer and bolder patterns, decorative restraint, brilliant yet possessed of an austere schematisation which is understandable given the circumstances under which the works were produced *vis a vis* the artist's failing eyesight, and for one critic reminiscent of Fernand Leger, "that great French political propagandist."[9]

The element of the human figure is a constant, humans being the subject of the

series. One difference here is that the figures are no longer quite faceless as in the *Addiction* lithographs, although in most of the paintings the figures are portrayed face-down. Anatomically speaking, the posture of the figure is consistent with the activity in which the figure is engaged. Symbolically, though, the face-down gesture is representative of a state of dis-honour, shame, disgrace, humiliation, regret or sorrow. It is significant that this posture is replicated in the figure in another work from the same period, the 1980 ink drawing, "Man with Stick". In the drawing, a crouched, turbaned figure leans on a thick stick, his head buried between hunched shoulders, his figure shown in an ambivalent position of walking/sitting.

The face-down gesture in "Man with Stick" is a reflection on the agonies of blindness, a personalised exploration, by the gesture, of pain, sorrow, and resignation, rather than a general pronouncement on disability. In *Stateless People* also the gesture could be interpreted, beyond the anatomical explanation, as symbolic of a statement on a specific phenomenon, as part of the artist's visual mapping of his theme.

As mentioned, each of the figures in the series is engaged in an activity, each of the paintings sub-titled for the activity and profession which the figure represents. There is a musician, an artist, a writer, and a composite picture showing all the figures and titled "Stateless People: An Assembly". On the surface, the title-image in each painting, and in the series as a whole, connote vaguely the theme of exile, alienation or re/dis-location, and in a sense relate this to a specific group in society - the creative or intellectual caste. If we should ignore yet another evocation, that of the stereotype of creative exiles: the American exile-writer in 1920s Paris or the side-street gypsy musician, a much deeper connotation arises, which is the dislocation of the intellectual class, the alienation of the intellectual from other classes or groups in

society.

What concretely situates the series more than any of these, however, is the following statement issued by the artist when an exhibition of the series opened at the Royal Festival Hall, South Bank, London on January 4, 1986:

> It is always assumed that 'Stateless People' are people who through the consequence of their political activities (in opposition to the establishment, or who suffer victimisation due to their religious conviction in their original countries, and either escaped or were forced out by their authoritarian regime. In this case, people who belong to this category cannot go back to their countries, and consequently end up without nationality.
>
> My stateless people are far from being political or religious refugees. They are people who are symbolically stateless. How can a person who has a country and lives there, of if he lives outside, can go back any time, be regarded as a stateless person? If a country exists just in name without a permanent foundation, foresight, commonsense and ambition for the good of the country, in other words dwells in chaos and stagnation, it is non-existent...
>
> In this modern age, it is not good enough for a country to feel that because it is not a colony of another power this fact in itself is commendable. What is commendable is what a country is trying to achieve and what it has accomplished. If symbolically a country does not exist, and if logic of existence is applied, anyone who inhabits such a country is stateless.[10]

With this the paintings assume a different presence and the complexity of the problematic they supposedly address is heightened. Of course nothing of the above statement is evident from the paintings themselves, textually read, except to the extent that we attempted above, and in a sense to the extent that, as we also observed, the theme is specifically linked to a specific class in society, the intellectual class.

If one may begin with the latter and the connotations around the structure of discourse it sets up, and try to link these with the South Bank statement, immediate contradictions quickly emerge. The sociology, placed against the context of the

statement, falls into problems. First, the concept of statelessness, as defined above, can only be identified with musicians, artists, writers, the intellectual class, in so far as it confuses the "State" with nation, and in so doing contradicts the Weberian concept of "nation" whereby it is this group, "those who usurp leadership in a *Kulturgemeinschaft* (that is, within a group of people who by virtue of their peculiarity have access to certain products that are considered 'cultural goods')," are specifically predestined to propagate the *national* idea.[11] Or else to the extent that it calls to mind Anthony Appiah's concept of "states in search of nations",[12] much as the situation Egonu creates above is in fact the opposite.

While the Appiah concept is rhetorically applicable to neo-colonial countries which are the objects of Egonu's critique, though it is theoretically much flawed since it ignores the persistence of the 'nation-monger class', the opposite, that is the concept of nations in search of state, is entirely inapplicable to these countries [today this can only be applied to Palestine and the emergent states of Eastern Europe]. In essence, while Egonu creates a familiar scenario and subjects it to criticism, his choice of denotive signifiers, both visual and textual, seem to subvert his critique.

As modern states, neo-colonial countries ["a country (which) has no right to feel independent (since) it can never master how to feed its people..."] cannot be seen as failures except in Rousseau's sense of the state, and this for quite a different reason from that on which Egonu places the foundations of statehood. For Rousseau the state could be argued to be dead when the legislative process is eroded or dead.[13] Only when the social contract is breached in this sense, that is, when the citizen is denied the right of moderation over the activities of the sovereign, does the state cease to exist. But even Rousseau's state ceased to exist long ago with the rise of the

absolutist states of Western Europe.[14] The existence of structures and machineries of force and coercion sufficiently define the modern state. As Weber put it, "the state cannot be defined in terms of its ends. There is scarcely any task that some political association has not taken in hand, and there is no task that one could say has always been exclusive and peculiar to those associations designated as political ones (such as) the state. Ultimately, one can define the modern state sociologically only in terms of the specific means peculiar to it, namely, the use of physical force".[15] In other words the fact that a country fails to satisfy the needs of its subjects or citizens, or seems to stagnate technologically or economically, does not cause it to desist from being a state.

An artist, of course, is not a sociologist. Neither is art always a good sociological vehicle or even apprehensible with sociological tools, as we have indeed occasionally tried to do with relative and questionable success. As sociology, therefore, within his own definitions, Egonu's *Stateless People* walks contestable grounds. Neither are the works quite relational to the concept they allegedly embody, nor does the concept itself hold up theoretically. What we find instead is that, on their own, the series could yield to valid interpretation even within the confines of their title but outside the lines of the artist's intent as defined by the South Bank statement. The creative caste in society, it could be argued, are indeed symbolically stateless in that they represent the defiant, transcendent spirit beyond the control of force or legitimate violence, in other words of the apparat of the state. But this is only symbolically.

Stateless People exemplify the ambivalent/ ambiguous nature of the art work which we posited in the theory of the masquerade at the beginning of this study.

They defy even the artist's own attempts to hedge them within absolute frames of his theoretical constructs, and they only fail to the extent that they are forced within those frames. On that count they could be seen as the least successful of the series we have so far considered. Beyond this, however, they further underline the nature of the artist's concerns at the time, as well as his continued striving to locate himself within a community, and to have his "being within society and produce (his) work for the good of society." That in themselves the works defy the specific role for which they are intended is quite a different matter and does not put this dedication to community in question. The artist's preoccupation with the fate of his people and his country persists, as one sees in the subsequent series of paintings from 1985 to 1988, *Will Knowledge Safeguard Freedom?*

The central theme of the series, *Will Knowledge Safeguard Freedom?*, is knowledge, science and technology, and the manner in which these determine the fate of races and the destiny of humankind. The failure of the Nigerian experiment, and with it the failure of the entire continent to march with the times and show credible willingness to get abreast of the rest of the world, continued to cause the artist personal anxiety and sorrow. In a conversation in October 1989 he reiterated his lingering concern and disappointment: "Although I am an artist, I am also interested in history. You look at Japan. If Japan had not tried hard, they would be a Russian colony today. But look at Ethiopia."[16]

Egonu has always had a fascination for Japan which does not derive from any particular love of the country or its people as from an admiration of its technological and economic advancement this century, its dogged recovery from the ravages of the Second World War through astute acquisition and mastery of technology and

Western civilisation while holding unto its traditions and morals. The statement above remarkably replicates an earlier statement in an unpublished lecture note from 1986 when he wrote:

> My study of Japanese history helped me a lot in my art. I do not mean Japanese art, but Japanese studies of Western Science and technology and eventual industrialisation. Had Japan failed or ignored to acquaint herself with science and technology, she would have ended up as a Russian colony and could not have withstood the Russian Navy's onslaught last century, let alone defeat it.[17]

He takes deep interest in the so-called technological miracles of South East Asia, in Hong Kong and Taiwan, and how these former lockets of backwardness have risen in this half of the century to the forefront of strength and advancement, while the entire African continent wobbles and crumbles, planting repression in place of progress and corruption in place of development.

It is the promises of science and knowledge, and how these not only set a people on the path of greatness and dignity, which inspired the series, *Will Knowledge Safeguard Freedom?* The leitmotif of the entire series is the ladder or staircase, symbols of ascent. The other recurrent motif is the human figure, more wholly realised here than in the *Addiction* prints. In most of the paintings in the series figures are shown in different postures and gestures of labour and manual engagement from reading to construction. As in the *Addiction* series, the first painting in the series summarises the running theme. For each of the concepts in the discursive construct there is a visual trope, a symbol, which leaves the painting unusually crowded and reminiscent only of the 'Exodus' of 1970 or 'The Arts' of 1974-75. Significantly, the figures are blindfolded while they engage in their preoccupations, which could be read as symbolising the search for and struggle in quest of knowledge. This is the nascent period of the quest, the beginning of enquiry and labour, which activities will

eventually lead to discovery, knowledge, and the light of advancement. The initial stages of enquiry are equally a stage of bondage, bondage to ignorance, backwardness, the absence of enlightenment. The ladder rests within reach, is not in use. Progress is at the disposal of man but only with knowledge does he discover this and ascend on its rungs. This state is represented not only in the blindfolds but also with iron bars and steel girders.

What results in the picture is the atmosphere of a penal colony, broken as it is simultaneously reinforced by the presence of a broken chain. While this environment underlines the frame of initial bondage, the atmosphere also argues the necessity of struggle as an essential gesture, which the artist infers when he speaks of Japan's trials. The framing of his reference to Japan in itself takes this position of progress as a product of labour and human strain, of the indispensability of exertion in the ascent to greatness, which moral he finds lacking in the vision and aspirations of his own people. In the 1986 paper referred to above he insists that the progress Japan has achieved was "through hard work and determination," and only through these can any other people hope to ascend.

In "Will Knowledge Safeguard Freedom Two" the artist challenges the determinist argument of racial superiority by inscribing the text: *Who is created by a Great God*. With this he returns failure to the individual and refuses to accept or excuse it. The problem of underdevelopment is not genetic or racial but one of ignorance and the refusal to strive, the institutionalisation of complacency. In a short, unpublished essay explaining the trope of the ladder, Egonu writes:

> It is human nature for some people to feel superior because of their wealth or social position in life. Likewise, this applies to one country feeling superior to another, or one human race feeling superior to the rest. The logic behind the feeling of being superior because of wealth,

social position, difference of race, is totally wrong.[18]

This would later be echoed by the opening sentences of Achebe's *The Trouble With Nigeria* where he states categorically that "there is nothing basically wrong with the Nigerian character," a position which could be extended to the other peoples of Africa. And the failure to strive which Egonu locates in the individual Achebe blames on the failure of leadership to affect positively the social behaviour of the citizenry and inspire the striving spirit, the "unwillingness or inability of ... leaders to rise to the responsibility, to the challenge of personal example which are the hallmarks of true leadership."[19]

In the paintings Egonu does not quite rest the problem with the failures of leadership or any sector of the race or population. He does not in fact deal with failure as point to the requisites of success: science, technology, cultural freedom, the work ethic. As Achebe, with usual insight takes the caution to note in his essay, "Whenever two Nigerians meet, their conversation will sooner or later slide into a litany of our national deficiencies."[20] The period of the eighties was one of intense social preoccupation in the visual arts in Nigeria, if not in the rest of Africa, and this at the questionable level of "litanies of deficiency." That Egonu rises above this is one of the distinguishing elements of his work, although one could argue quite validly that his distance from the reality he contemplates gives him required room to be philosophical.

It is perhaps this privilege also which explains the optimism and vision signified in the paintings, especially in the leitmotif of the ladder and the symbol of flowers. Remarkably, this symbol appears several years later as a central trope in the prize-winning novel of his younger countryman and fellow emigre, Ben Okri's *The*

Famished Road. Although as a contemplation on the same theme *The Famished Road* hovers between the category of "litanies" and that of critical affirmation, the motif of the flower persistently posits an optimistic present, the same represented in Achebe's otherwise virulent *Anthills of the Savannah* by the new born baby at the end of the novel. What these three have in common, perhaps it will make sense to note, is that they all live in relocation and can transcend the stifling resignation and essential fatalism to which their fellow citizens at home are subject to.

In *Will Knowledge Safeguard Freedom?* Egonu does not cast the damning eye but draws attention to universal lessons of history relevant for every people and race. A number of paintings in the series he calls "portraits", each with a central figure and an inscription which indicates the race of the figure while evoking the other races. Each figure clutches a ladder. The races are levelled, the prerequisites of progress and development reduced to knowledge and the striving spirit. For all humanity the keys to advancement and self-improvement are knowledge, effort, the quest for discovery.

The series attains a level of correlation between intent and discernible visual symbolism which *Stateless People* is unable to achieve. Yet the philosophy which it enunciates is one that is to some extent arguably simplistic, even deterministic, and remains open to question. Many have challenged the valorisation of labour and the work ethic, and in deconstructing it shown that it is essentially oppressive against lower classes of society and is instituted by those classes in society which benefit most from the toils of the labouring class. On the level that Egonu enunciates them, though, they seem most appropriate, even infallible.

The significance of these paintings, however, is not simply or necessarily in the rigour or validity of their contents or the reconcilability of these with the artist's

pronounced intent, as in the fact that, like Stateless People and the war paintings, they demonstrate a strong predilection for committed art, and a strong, fairly defined sense of community.

This predilection, in itself, does not in any way define the entirety of the artist's work or career, as we shall soon see. His attachment to a sense of 'home' outside of his society of abode, and his preoccupation with themes of alienation and estrangement, are only an aspect of his work, an arguably major aspect but only an aspect still, and cannot define his place as an artist. The variety of his thematic preoccupations defies the narrow margins of cheap and convenient categories and theories. Despite his dedication to an articulation of the processes and problems of his society, he has produced work demonstrative of an equal disposition to artistic pleasure, even of indulgence in the processes of his art and the vagaries of orthodox practice. His nudes and reclining figures, his witty interpretations of aspects of life both in his culture and in his immediate environment, his own evident if subtle exuberance all transcend the easy delineations of adventurist and deterministic definitions of modern African art and culture, and show that such categories are as ultimately simplistic and unrealistic as they are parochial.

Egonu's work places him alongside the best known artists of his generation and society as one with a clear understanding of the essence of art and the role of the artist in that society. Like these other artists also, his work equally shows that this relationship is neither intractable nor easily apprehensible.

Notes

1. Uche Okeke, *Art in Development: A Nigerian Perspective* [Nimo/Minneapolis: Asele Institute and Africanamerican Cultural Centre, 1982] p. 16.

2. Ibid., p. 16.

3. Ben Okri in *The Observer*, 20 September, 1987.

4. Nelson Wattie, "The Community as Protagonist in the Novels of Chinua Achebe and Witi Ihimaera", in Daniel Massa, ed., *Individual and Community in Commonwealth Literature* [Malta: University Press, 1979] pp. 69-74.

5. Ginsberg, *Howl* [San Francisco: City Lights Books, 1967]

6. Interviews with the artist, South Kenton, December 1989.

7. General Olusegun Obasanjo, quoted in Chinua Achebe, *The Trouble with Nigeria* [Enugu: Fourth Dimension Publishers, 1983] p. 9.

8. Ibid., p. 38.

9. Collin Moss, EADT, 28 August 1987, p. 8.

10. Egonu, "Paintings (Stateless People)", unpublished statement, London, 1986. Artist's private papers.

11. Max Weber, *Economy and Society*, Vol. 1 [Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1978] p. 926.

12. A.K. Appiah, 'In My Father's House', 1992 Lugard Lecture, London School of Economics.

13. J.- J. Rousseau, *The Social Contract* [Penguin 1968, first published 1762]

14. Perry Anderson, "The Absolutist State in the West" in Anderson, *The Absolutist State* [Verso Edition 1979, originally published by NBL, London 1974] p. 15.

15. H.H. Gerth and C. Wright Mills, eds., *Max Weber* [London: Routledge and Keegan Paul, 1970] p. 77.

16. Interviews, October 1989.

17. Uzo Egonu, unpublished paper, 1986.

18. Egonu, unpublished and undated paper, artist's files.

19. Chinua Achebe, *The Trouble with Nigeria*, p. 1.

20. Ibid., p. 2.

Chapter Seven

WOMEN IN EGONU'S WORK

As we have seen in the foregoing chapters, the reaches of Egonu's art and concerns go well beyond what Chidi Amuta has described as "the vicissitudes of national history",[1] and even where this has been the focus of his vocation, he has done more to elicit the ambivalences of the fiction of "nation" than merely textualise the vicissitudes of its history, shifting the parameters of his own definitions as he finds fit, re-iterating both in his form and in his themes the essential nature of art as a masquerading act. At his most engaged, his art still supercedes and defies Amuta's own determinist predication of contemporary African cultural practise on the "decisive context" of "capitalist imperialism," much as it does not deny completely its importance of place in the general historical ambience of contemporary African cultures.

Egonu's *figuring* of the female in his work even further undermines theoretical absolutism. Not only does his occasional return to the reclining nude, for instance at the height of the collapse of the Biafran experiment, set off a discourse of profound ambivalence and ineluctibility, a certain, discernible progression in his treatment of the female figure in his work removes it almost totally from the frames of Amuta's neocolonial African culture and places it within a very personal space of enunciation. As we shall see, the social significance of what we shall here refer to as the Egonu

woman does not diminish with this progression -indeed it may be argued to gain in focus and cogency - yet the variance of the "image", from moment to moment, follows a personal rather than shared pattern, a pattern consistent more with the development of his art and the vicissitudes of his own history than the nation's.

While it could be argued from the onset that his removal from direct experience of his "national" culture, if that construct is still tenable after our explorations of his denotations of nation, in a sense inevitably excuses his art from its "decisive contexts", his close attachment to his home society and his vulnerability to its vagaries and vicissitudes are not in question and that undermines any such suggestions or speculatives. What comes clear here is not whether one artist's work fails to fit into a particular, predefined ambience, but the poverty of a myopic definition of that ambience. In other words Egonu's figuring of the female defies apprehension through the frame of the "neocolonial", "capitalist imperialist" paradigm defined by Amuta, not simply because his paintings are produced outside Nigeria, but more because no historical incident or epochal tenor has rigid and unbreachable hold over "all cutural practice" in any given society or milieu.

The transformation of the Egonu woman falls into a number of fairly delineable phases which in the main echo phases in the formalistic and thematic development of the artist's work from the early fifties, with room for exceptional works in which he falls back to what may be regarded as genre. Throughout his *oeuvre*, and the figuring of woman in this *oeuvre*, there is a discernible flux between the fully realised icon and the emergent figure as the artist moves from one phase of stylistic or thematic progression to another, just as can be seen in his employment or realisation of the general iconography of the period. In each case we are presented

with an introductory form which points in a generally identifiable direction, and gradually comes into consolidation as the phase which it signals eventually matures. In a number of other instances, as the artist poises to move into a different phase in his work, the figuration reverts briefly to genre, as we see at the end of the war period when he returned briefly to the reclining nude in the 1969 'Nude Woman', the female nude serving as perhaps the singular topos throughout his work.

An early example of the Egonu woman, the 1962 'Portrait of a Guinea Girl', signifies in many ways the location of his artistic and stylistic evolution rather than any particular comment on woman or the female body. 'Portrait' falls into the series of descriptive figure themes which mark the artist's period of nostalgia in the fifties and early sixties when the central theme of his work was a romance with home, as we showed in an earlier chapter. This period was, as we also saw, equally characterised by an effort to break formalistically with the tradition of the academy which marked his Camberwell years and the period of his travels in Europe. Precisely, the work stands between the immediate post-Camberwell years and what we described earlier as the 'naivist' period when he struggled to shed completely the strictures of classical figuration by defying anatomical accuracy and representational clarity, replacing these with indiscriminate chromatism and a fuzzy treatment of form reminiscent of Pollock's early New York period.

In 'Portrait of a Guinea Girl', a young woman is located in the centre of the painting, dominating it effectively with the monumentality of a High Renaissance portrait. The strong influence of Renaissance portraiture on the composition is shown further in the employment of the Leonardesque pyramid in the centre of the picture, its apex falling on the head of the figure, almost every other element in the

composition inclining towards her, including the blue cloud above. A further parallel is evident in the combination of these features, the monumental figure, the pyramid, and a rustic lyricism, one of the significant elements in Leonardo's 'Mona Lisa'. The figure is embedded in a landscape meticulously observed and rendered in a subtle palette of vegetation camly graded in places and vigorously worked in others. To one side of the lady a bright, yellow flower is in bloom, and above these the entire vegetation seems to be in inflorence. The vegation here, thick, almost harsh in places, and close, as opposed to the retreating, rigmaroling distance of the landscape in 'Mona Lisa', achieves equal lyricism by its different, highly evocative, pastoral presence, the bright, blue tropical sky receeding behind the figure, casting her head in a strong cutout.

Despite an awkward gesture of the hand, the figure is poised and insistent, thrusting through the background and foreground to settle on the environment in an assertive, almost heroic manner. There is a restrained pleasantness to her countenance, a smile held back, her body at a slight, almost undiscernible, angle to her head. Though this Guinean Mona Lisa is clad in the attire of the early sixties, bright and slightly suggestive around her bust, with a deep neck-cut that emphasises her long neck, with a pop-wig encircling her face, there is unarguable dignity and restraint to her presence that falls within the lines of renaissance neo-classicism, a contemporaneous interpretation of the classical nobility that characterises renaissance portraiture.[2]

The artist's shortcomings in figure painting show up here in the stiff, awkward hand, and the wooden look it gives the figure. Also, the manipulation of depth and space in the lower part of the picture where her stocking-clad thighs blend into the

coloration of the vegetation, leaves us, except at very close scrutiny, with a feeling that the figure is cut and placed on a pedestal. This re-emphasises the uncomfortable impression that the figure is a life-size wooden sculpture rather than a living being. There is an equal turgidity around the figure's bust, ameliorated only by the careful realisation of her attire. But as said, these are only manifestations of technical shortfalls rather than part of a complex of signification. Beyond these, and the fact that the figure is clothed in body-hugging apparel, there is little else to obscure the classical allusions in the portrait, especially its debts to 'Mona Lisa'.

What, then, does the portrait tell us by, or beyond, its monumentality and noble gaze? What woman do we see? An idealisation of woman, or an aspiration towards the platonic prototype? The creation of a goddess or heroine through the figure of the woman outdoors, in the classical or biblical tradition, or a subtle replication of the playgirl in the garden erotica of early 1850's French art?.[3] The carriage of the figure, and the careful covering of her body, of course remove any strong echoes of the last category. Yet the choice of attire, beyond investing her with contemporaneity, also invests her with an arguable element of ambiguous sexual signification.

Is she a distillation of the Negritude grand ideal of 'Mother Africa', or a mere, embellished portrait of a young woman? The picture opens up to us when it is placed alongside other works from the period, like the similar, 'Portrait of a Nigerian Girl' [1962], 'Village Blacksmith in Igboland' [1961], 'Boy with a Budgerigar', and 'Boy with Sweetcorn', the last two from 1963. What the works have in common, as we saw, is that they serve the artist as nodes of memory, reviving his impressions of home and celebrating recollected aspects of his society. We have located these within the

ambience of a mental departure from Europe, the exile's return to his 'Native Land' in a period of fervid, nationalism, reminiscent of Cesaire's *Cahier d'un Retour au Pays Natal* ["From thinking of the Congo/ I have become a Congo buzzing with forests and rivers..."][4] At this stage of the return a certain absence of clarity and focus, an element that will come with maturation in this direction, is evident not only in the persistent grip of the classical tradition the artist strives to escape, but also in the genre chosen to signify that departure.

The allusion to Negritude is both valid and important because the artist's invention of a black Mona Lisa planted in a tropical landscape which is itself no more than a substitute for the temperate background of the original, parallels Negritude's invention of the Black Woman through the negrification of turn of the nineteenth century french poster models,[5] just as his evocations of the Homeland, at the time still very much romantic, echo the romanticism of Negritude. To put a Black woman in the place of the most discussed and most adulated female in Western art, is reminiscent of Senghor's adulations of the Black woman. What is interesting, just as it underlines the purely romantic nature of these adulatory acts, is that both artists's were, each at the time of his own adulation, deeply involved with a white woman. Later we shall look briefly at some implications of this contradiction.

Beyond an innocent, ordinary portrait of a young lady, then, Portrait defines the Egonu woman of this period, and what we see is a celebratory figure, an African Mona Lisa who serves as a vehicle for the artist's recreation of home, a projection of his growing nationalism and a subversion of the European classical tradition. It is neither a contemplation of the female figure nor a serious comment on feminity, but, like his paintings of Igbo blacksmiths or the artist's recollections of his childhood and

his brother's in the other paintings of this period, part of his body of "metaphors", which define what we have called his years of nostalgia, and come into full form in the mask paintings of 1963.

The stylistic period beginning 1964 and maturing in 1965 brings us another form of the Egonu woman, a good example of which we see first in the 1964 'Nude Combing Her Hair'. Here the female figure is only an element in a formalistic experiment as the artist defines a new language in his work, that of new textures, bold lines, gradual banishment of depth and the linear perspective, as we discussed earlier on. Speaking about the figure in 'Nude Combing'in 1965[6] Egonu acknowledged the continued influence of the Western tradition in not only his choice of theme but also, to some extent, his treatment of the theme, which basically subsumes the figure under her surroundings. He evokes Degas's toilet paintings as his "direct" source of inspiration. What we find, though, is that while Degas's staged pictures of women in their toilets contemplate upper class leisure in 19th century French society, falling squarely within the mainstream of 19th century erotica, Egonu's 'Nude Combing' is in the main a mere experiment with elements of design and has little to do with the female figure, women, or society. He has insisted that it is inconceivable that an artist should paint the nude "just for the sake of following the artistic tradition" or "because it is just like painting a book or a table,"[7]. According to him, the appeal of the nude lies in its "many possibilities ... possibilities that the male nude lacks".[8] But his grounds for this argument, which are that "there are more interesting lines in the female figure than in the male...", give him away as indeed a mere victim of tradition. The reference is directly to Hogarth's theory of the Line of Beauty in his *Analysis of Beauty* of 1753, where he contended that, with the help of

stays, the female figure exhibits "such a perfect, precise, serpentine line", a line of beauty the like of which cannot be found in the male form, naked or clothed.[9] In 'Nude Woman Combing Her Hair', there is little evidence of lines "more interesting" than can be found in the male, and this could well be said of any other of the artist's nudes. Therefore, not only is his use of the female nude a perpetuation of tradition, and evidence of a lingering claim to that tradition, its complete subsumation below a preoccupation with design distinguishes it from that tradition, showing an attitude to the figure which is not different from that to a still-life.

Surely the woman in 'Nude Woman Combing Her Hair', unlike the nude in the European tradition, is not a sex object: there is no erotic dimension to her form or disposition, just as there is clearly no such intent. In a sense, she is dis-gendered, her sexuality lost in the play with form. She is indeed an object only to the extent that any other element in the painting, and in many others of the same period, could be so considered, being a mere pattern in a composition of patterns. Beyond the pull of a topos, there is little else that justifies her above a male figure, or no figure at all. Indeed, despite the artist's pronouncement, her purpose could well be served by a book or a table. In a sense, she does not exist, and as such can only be denoted as "she" in scare quotes.

In the 1965 'Nude Before A Mirror', there is a more discernible presence, although the figure still does not fully come into itself. The allusion to the European tradition is still evident, as in the dress of the female figure which is a cross between a nightgown and a corset with visible draws on the back. It is clear that the painting was not modelled, and the artist admits to this, but derived from earlier interpretations of the subject by other artists. 'Nude Before A Mirror' is a theme the

artist would come back to a number of times in his career, but in each case it is neither the erotic nor any thematic relevance that comes across, but a preoccupation with design and the interplay of formal elements.

It is this sexlessness that Egonu's female nudes share, the lack of erotic presence or intent, and indeed of concrete objectivity. One of the most fully realised of the nudes is the 'Nude Woman' of 1969 referred to above. It is a rare instance in which the nude faces the viewer squarely, reclining leisurely without any intent to heighten the erotic appeal by the traditional gimmick of partial obscurity. Yet, the figure is a schematised pattern of textures and lines, an example of what the artist describes as "Picassonised nudes"[10], rather than a projection of the female body. In all its loudness, it is rid of the evocative properties of erotica found in a the subtlest of Renoir's bathers or the most brutalised of De Kooning's women. Or the provocativeness of Ashanti gold weights. The gaze is not on the woman. It becomes untenable to construct the discourse of male voyeurism or erotic-objectification which encapsulates the image of the female in much Western art, and certainly the nude, around the Egonu nude. So that, though they are directly inspired by the Western nude rather than images of the nude in African art, these representations depart from tradition and erect a distance which may not be entirely innocent, but certainly invests the act with a level of ambivalence open to every interpretation but the above. One clear role into which the Egonu woman does not fit, therefore, is the erotic female, woman as sex object.

This distance is replicated in the image of the woman in 'Woman with Umbrella' of 1965, which, though it is not a figure in the nude, and fits obviously into genre, shares with the nudes the sexlessness which defines several forms of the

Egonu woman. Although here the figure is more clearly naturalistic and pictorial, her femininity is signified only in the title of the painting. The ellaborate hair and suggestions of breasts and genitals that define the gender, if not femininity, of the nudes, is entirely absent here, the head shorn and the arms so placed as to obscure the bust. All we see is indeed a 'Figure with Umbrella' rather than a woman.

This austere, distanced attitude to femininity which characterises the artist's work of the period, is carried even into his 'Portrait of Hiltrud', a terse, almost stridently gothic, frontal painting of his girlfriend Hiltrud Streicher, later to become his wife. The portrait differs from much work of the period in its very naturalistic approach. There is no subjection of figure to design here, and the style of representation is most conservative and inconsistent with his other work at the time. But the lady sits in almost the same angular, frontal pose as the 'Nude Woman' of 1964, though, rather than a beguiling gaze cast downwards, she looks straightforward, a restrained smile on her upright face. She is clothed in a dark, drab, neckhigh sweater, and a long, flowered skirt, her hands placed dignifyingly on her lap. Her brunette hair is coiffeured in the style of the mid-sixties, piling up a large bun on top, a hairdo we find on Mrs Egonu in photographs from 1972. The plain brickwork that we find in most works of the period forms the barkground, with a few decorative insinuations. The figure projects a certain peasant air, or indeed one of nurse or maid, which feeling the artist would not have intended.

The inconsistency in style which marks 'Portrait of Hiltrud' out from the rest of the artist's work from this period not only shows a momentary lack of faith in his new formalistic language, but also a questionable discriminatory attitude in his use of the human figure. Although, as we have argued, there is still that detachment we

find in his incorporation of the female nude as design, the return to photographic representation indeed underlines the position that these other paintings are not portraits or representations, and in them the human figure is not truly human. The female figure is, in precise contrast to the artist's own claims, much like a book or table or motifs from tarot cards. When 'she' is truly human, as in the Hiltrud portrait, the artist returns to the conservative realism of the academy and tradition, for as far as his own evident terseness finds room for. The significance of the portrait, then, is first in its confirmation of the absence of the erotic intent in the artist's figuring of the female body, and secondly in suggseting that the Egonu nude is, figurally, an absence.

We have already seen the Egonu woman of the war period, beginning perhaps with the 'Mother and Child'of 1966 [Physical Protection] in which the woman takes a particularly human and entirely symbolic and representational form. Although the artist had painted the theme of Mother and Child a number of times before the painting of 1966, not even his explanations of these paintings remove them from the category of mere genre. The distinguishing thing in the 'Mother and Child' of 1965 is that in it the artist changes from the traditional composition of the subject to one that observes the peculiar way in which African women carry their children. In a sense, the painting continues the artist's practice at this period of Africanising themes in traditional Western art, like we saw in the 'Portrait' of 1962, and so does not in any serious sense provide a reconstruction of the image of woman as a mother. Of course one could argue, as the artist's statement on the 1965 'Mother and Child'[11] seems to insinuate, that in introducing an image of the African mother the artist already introduces not only the peculiarity of carrying children on the back but with that

much deeper peculiarities around maternity and the relationship between the mother and the child in Africa. But that is in a sense stretching the argument since the painting does not claim any particular originality and does not in any visual or discernible metaphorical way extend the contemplation of this relationship. Like 'Portrait of a Guinea Girl', the 1965 'Mother and Child' is an act of departure from the academy, and on a deeper level, of nationalism and self recovery, thin as it ultimately is.

But in the 1966 'Mother and Child' several things are at work at the same time, and a woman eventually emerges. The theme and drama of the painting removes it from the category of formalistic experimentation. Though the artist's evolution of language was still in progress, as it would indeed be throughout his career, in this painting signification is paramount. Through a deep and complex psychological construct he creates a woman who, though not in any significant sense revolutionary, helps us enter the mental landscapes of war and violence, especially as they affect the young. The image is unarguably conservative: woman as mother, as protector, as a foil to man and his violent ways. Nothing we have not seen or heard. But she appears as a recognisable human, neither object nor patchwork, in a role which may not be spectacular but is important. It is a deep portrayal, with all of its conservatism, and brings us perhaps most clearly the earliest rounded Egonu woman. It is revealing that to portray this, the artist insists on a level of orthodox pictorial clarity, not exactly in the manner of Portrait of Hiltrud' from the previous year, but surely not in the formalistic style of the nude paintings of 1964 and 1965.

When he decides to stick to the new style in the rest of the war paintings, there is insistent and strident clarity in the forms, the artist taking time to present them

with remarkable graphic prominence. The exception here would be 'Woman in Grief' [1968] which employs the style of the nudes. As we saw, the Egonu woman of the war years evolves into a leitmotif, a symbol of grief, privation, persecution, and ultimately, of monumental courage and resilience. The woman in 'The World in Perspective' is dead and rotting, tied to a tree with her child on her back. And still she rises. She is not simply a personification of an ideal or a cause and a nation, as in Delacroix's 'Liberty Leading the People'. She is an individual woman, representative of hundreds of thousands of real women who bore the grief and violence of the Biafran tragedy. The reality of the Nigeria-Biafra war, of course, is that it involved women at fairly active military levels as well, not just as mothers and keepers of the nation. But because the war paintings are not mere allegories or official war art, because they operate largely at the metaphorical level, the absence of images of fighting female soldiers is consistent with the absence of representation at the literal level.

Of course, the definition of power and violence as male is a stereotype especially of western art. Linda Nochlin's deconstruction of David's 'Oath of the Horatii' challenges the stereotype of the emotional and soft female as a foil to the violent courage of the male[12] which is very evident in the painting. There is an arguable visual parallelism between the 'Horatii' and Egonu's 'Mother and Child [Physical Protection]'. We find in both paintings the same dichotomy of the male engaged in a violent or violence-oriented act, and the flinching female looking away, huddling together with the child. Indeed the compositional placement of the figures in both paintings, the male macho to the left, and the huddled female to the right, are remarkably similar. Egonu's 'Mother and Child' are even recognisable as the first

woman to the right in David's Horatii, and the one of the children under her, the only immediate difference being that while David's child - the other of the two is actively excluded from the drama and thus from the picture - looks on at the ritual enactment with a child's glee and innocence while the Egonu child faces away in resonant terror. From our discussion of the painting in chapter six, however, it is evident that the parallelisms end almost at this visual, literal, level.

The two paintings begin to depart one from the other from the point where we recognise that David's work is a myth-making construction, as Nochlin acknowledges, the visual and indeed detail historical elements of the painting being the artist's own inventions rather than verifiable derivatives from the Roman original. The counterpoising of male violence [courage, heroism, determination, patriotism, the historical responsibility to protect the weak female] which we find in 'Oath of the Horatii', are very much infusions of 17th century European gender constructions rather than universals. And the specific ambience of Egonu's 'Mother and Child' is remarkably different from 17th century European neo-classicism. Of course Egonu defines violent conflict and war as precisely male, foiling this image with that of the female and the child, but this construction neither precludes or denies female participation in crises, nor does it erect a theory of 'female' weakness against which 'male' valour could be contrasted. Gender dichotomisation of power and 'the courageous act', which we find in the 'Horatii', is only part of the structure of dichotomisation which, as Bell Hooks has observed, forms "the central ideological component of all systems of domination in Western society."[13] One visually apparent and very significant difference between David's painting and Egonu's is that, while the Horatii women are languid and limp, resignedly staying in - or effectively

consigned to - their 'rightful place', with only passive scorn for the men and their machismo, Egonu's woman is a centre of dramatic anguish. She is stricken, and her terror is as impressionable as it is central to the logic of the picture. It is significant also that, though both compositions are built in two sections delineated both visually and psychologically, while the male space takes a larger section in the 'Horatii', Egonu's mother and child occupy the larger, central space while the male space is tucked away, rightly, in a corner. The dominant locus of the picture, as the title and the composition clearly indicate, is the woman and child, and the issue here is not the valorisation of the machismo.

Indeed, the gender designation of violence - as distinct from power, though related to it - as male, is consistent with the facts of recent political history. Not even Margaret Thatcher's involvement in the Falklands, or Indhira Gandhi's in the Sikh upheavals of the 1980s, invalidates this in any real sense. The substructures of conflict and violence, and this includes neo-colonialism, remain essentially and recognisably male. A gender definition of crises which defines the female as a victim of, and symbol of resistance to, the phalicism of force and bloodshed, especially in the 20th century, such as we find in the Egonu woman of the war paintings, seems quite valid and historically tenable.

Nevertheless, the theme of Mother and Child is hardly an innocent one. It remains controversial, the image of woman as mother being a role definition perpetuated to actively consign the female to the margins of power [a vast body of work exists on this]. Admittedly the origins of the theme in Western history and religious thought which signified woman as the mother of the saviour, has gradually yielded to a stripping process over the millenia, leaving the motif swinging between

a romanticisation of maternity and decontextualisation as a social stereotype transfigures into a topos of high art. What distinguishes the Egonu 'Mother and Child' of 1966, and indeed the other paintings of the period where this image occurs, is that they succeed in steering discourse clear of the terrain of the mother as baby-maker by dealing with a social reality the urgency and sharpness of which, rather than objectify this role to exploit it, empowers it by locating the destiny of a people in it. Crises and violent conflict leave little room for voyeurism, and the analytical depth of the paintings centralises a discourse which effectively marginalises stereotypes and stock roles in a way that representations of women and war do not, not even Picasso's representation of woman in 'Guernica'.[14]

In the seventies the Egonu woman changed, in line with his romance with religious revivalism. The anguished but resilient woman we find in the war paintings gives way to a node of nostalgia in the form of priestesses and devotees. The woman of the early sixties returns, but in a historically and culturally verifiable form, the phenomenon of female priests and devotees being a surviving feature of the culture which Egonu sought to recapture or replicate. The restitution to power of the female in the form of a goddess, ancestral spirit, or priestess, is one we find in a number of contemporary African works, the most important perhaps being the novels of Chinua Achebe, and the most recent being in Ghanaian director Kwesi Owusu's movie, *Ama*. In Achebe, whether she is the Earth Goddess, priestess of a deity as in Chielo in *Things Fall Apart*, or spirit incarnate as in Beatrice in *Anthills of the Savannah*, she is always strategically empowered with the trump card in a rather metaphysical power structure that, as critics have pointed out, seem to keep her from the real spaces of power.[15]

In Owusu's *Ama*, Aunt Mabelle, the 'strongest' female character in the movie, is a priestess, prophetess, and church leader. Yet, as Atsango Chesoni has pointed out,[16] she is excluded from the space of everyday powerplay which remains an essentially male space, and carefully hedged into the 'spiritual' and metaphysical. The creation and consignment of the powerful female to the religious space, or if we should put it another way, ceding the metaphysical space to the female, is therefore an ambivalent gesture which, though it may draw from cultural reality, does not quite escape the critical gaze.

Egonu's paintings of priestesses and devotees are among his most visually appealing works. They are bold, emphatic, and colourful, and signal a period in his work when a level of material and spiritual contentment are discernible, though, ironically, some of them ['Priestess of the Goddess of Lightning and Thunder, 1978, 'Priestess of the Shrine of the River Goddess', 1978] were painted when he was already battling with a failing sight. They also signal the maturation of his efforts to locate himself unequivocally within a specific cultural history. As iconographic systems, however, they are unpretentiously thin, bearing within them little that symbolically links them to their theme. Their symbolic significance, therefore, is only on that level where they denote the artist's self-definition and celebration. The image of woman which we gleam from them, visually, is incomplete until they are contextualised within the frames of title and history. But this is not enough, as has been said, to qualify them as free from gender/power connotations. One thing does, however; the occurence of the male in same roles in other paintings of the period ['The Priest and a Woman Possessed', 1971, 'Adoration of the Divine King', 1970, etc]. In these other paintings we are shown males as well as females in central clerical or

theomorphic positions, referentially situated within a pantheistic culture which upholds gender structures that are in several respects distinct from those of Western, Christian society. The figure of the female as an embodiment of power, seen within these contexts, is therefore not necessarily a foil for, or backdrop to, male power, nor does it erect a false theory of female empowerment or perpertuate one of emasculation. The women we see, with the men, whether they appear as Gods or clerics, are concrete images which the artist calls up in an effort to recollect and repossess a heritage.

Another woman we find in the paintings of the late seventies is the vain female. We find her in 'Woman Before a Mirror' [1977], 'Woman in Her Favourite Attire' [1978], 'Woman with a Flower' [1978], and 'Woman with a Glass of Wine' [1979]. Alongside her, also, we find the vain male in 'Man with A Pipe' [1973], the artist returning to the subject in a larger painting of 1978], 'Flambouyant Poet' [1977], 'Man with a Glass of Beer' [1979], and others. As noted earlier, this was a period of light-heartedness in the artist's work, ironical giving the personal agony, especially shortly after, of a failing sight. The individuals we find in these paintings issue from the artist's imagination, perhaps as creative alter-egos for the man and woman on the street, and for the artist in anguish. Socio-politically speaking, while the artist's home society during this period could be positively contrasted with that of the decade before, replacing crises with political confidence and the starvation of the war period with economic ebullience, this was also a fairly gloomy period in Britain, with a struggling labour government, worker disillusionment and strike actions, a slump in customer confidence, hardly an appropriate ambience for the *joie de vivre* we find in the paintings.

In these paintings, therefore, it seems that the artist is creating a compensate reality, a fill-in world, a practice which we recognise from the 1962 'Still Life with Melon and Pineapple' which, according to him, was painted because "naturally [he] chose to paint such things which [he] could not easily have whenever [he] wanted them."[17] In the late seventies these would include, especially for him, happiness, ebullience of spirit, material security, none of which he had in full. It is remarkable that 1979, the year his eye cataract problem took its final downward plunge, was the year he painted 'Singing Boy', 'Concertina Player', 'Flute Player resting', 'Happy Anniversary', and 'Portraits of Mr and Mrs X', about the wittiest works of his entire career so far. The contemplation of human vanity, in which the woman of this period is defined, is therefore conceivably not a critique, but an expression of longing, the evocation of an absence, comparable with the creative reclamation which Beethoven attempted with his works from 1803 as his hearing failed him, and especially in the last symphonies when illness plagued him.

In 1979 also, Egonu began the sketches and preliminary drawings for a series of screen prints on the woman at home or what, if we may borrow a term from Stewart Brown's Lugard's Bridge,[18] may be described as his *Domesticities*. Between 1979 and 1982, the most intense period of his partial blindness, he produced 'Lone Eater' [1979], 'Mending' [1980], 'A Cup of Coffee in Solitude' [1981], and 'Tasting' [1980], 'A Letter' [1982], 'Lone Player' [1980], 'Reading' [1980], 'Coffee Time' [1979], and a number of ink drawings and related gouaches.

These Domesticities, in their stunning simplicity, precision, and power of evocation, belong with the artist's most important work, significant in his oeuvre as earlier series such as *Stateless People*, the *Addiction* series, and indeed, to some extent,

the war paintings. Like each of earlier series, the Domesticities are marked by a consistent iconography, the most prominent element of which is the lone, looming figure of the female which dominates the picture frame. The hands alone signify the human presence, and breast forms are insinuated to define the gender. In all cases there is an indication of activity which designates a specific chore: in 'Coffee Time' and 'A Cup of Coffee in Solitude', the hands are in the process of pouring coffee, and in 'Lone Player' and 'Lone Eater', the hands are engaged in the specific actions denoted by the respective title. The particular environment or location of these actions, which is discernibly the domestic space, is represented by patterns which specifically suggest wallpaper and carpets, some of the patterns being indeed identifiable to specific brand designs. These patterns are then echoed, in the artist's usual style, in the apparel of the figures, providing a delicate formal cohesion which, together with the masterful manipulation of positive and negative spaces, belongs to the classical tradition of Igbo mural design. The shapes are bold, stark, aggressive and assertive; the signifying patterns are carefully hedged into the corners except in the 1979 study, 'Coffee Time' which eventually transformed into 'A Cup of Coffee in Solitude' and in the process lost its rather hesitant and profuse patterning.

The lines are clean, precise, economical. Colour is carefully orchesrated so it is neither intrusive, except also in the earliest studies, nor redundant. The path between figuration and cognition is as short and translucent as it is ambivalent and deceptive. And through the use of the silkscreen medium, each work is lent a greater feel of clinicality and analyticism.

What emerges from these works, their billboard precision of statement, their almost brutal simplicity, and the overall coherence of the series, is a carefully and

consciously contructed system of signification with an overwhelming sense of logical intent. It is this system we shall now attempt to pry apart. What image emerges from these works of the Egonu woman?

In all the works in the series, there is a consistent absence of the head, a feature which grows in significance because it is not repeated in such other works from the same period as the screenprint, 'Flute Player Resting' [1979] or the ink drawing, 'Man with a Stick' [1980], for instance, each of which figures a male. The immediate critical reaction to this, of course, is to suggest a theory of dichotomisation by denial or deprivation. In other words one could posit that by singling out his female figures from this period for decapitation, the artist means to the define the female as the Other by insinuating the absence of a specific qualifier, a qualify designated present in the male. This qualifier would be located in the head. What would it be?

Barbara Erlich White notes that Renoir's paintings of women from 1885 to 1887 contain "this quality of a woman being all body and no mind", and reads this definition in the fact that in the paintings, the women are "enormous in size", in one case with "partially exposed breast... [and] her face is devoid of expression or feeling."[19] What White fails to observe is that this absence of a mind, or of intellect, is signified much more strongly in the size of heads which Renoir invests these women with, compared to their enormous buxomness. The head is methodically diminished, impoverished, and the viewer's attention seldom goes in that direction. Renoir, a careful composer of pictures enobled with a deep knowledge of the classical tradition,[20] also held very strong and backward views of women and their proper place in society, believing, as White points out, that "men should be thinkers, artists

and intellectuals, while women should be sources of pleasure for men - in sex, in mothering, in homemaking".[21] His head-body proportions were therefore a conscious visual signification of these ideas. May one then see the absence of heads in Egonu's images of women in these prints as a conscious decapitation signifying the same ideas we have outlined here? Or would one be treading dangerous ground by such reading?

The artist has no known ideas of women identical to Renoir's or the orthodox white male. Nor is he known to question the intellect of the female. Indeed, the first painting in a small portfolio called *Poets and Philosophers* from the same period, is of a poetess, and, another oil from 1978 is titled 'Woman Reading' a subject which would return in one of the prints in the *Domesticities*, 'Reading'. Even a painting which supposedly deals with leisure, the 1980 oil, 'Woman Resting', shows the female figure passing time with a book. This would be definitely intolerable by the terms of Renoir's letter of 8 April, 1888 to Catulle Mendes in which he states that "women are monsters who are authors, lawyers... bores who are nothing more than five-legged beasts."[22]. What, then, explains the missing heads in these prints?

One would venture two explanations here; the first is one of design expediency. We have mentioned that the prints belong to the classical tradition of Igbo mural design and body painting, and one of the central design concepts of this genre is that of 'saturation' [an illustration, already cited in an earlier chapter, could be found in the 1990 Smithsonian documentary on Nigerian art, *Kindred Spirits*.] A composition must contain only that which is necessary, in other words the barest essential, the essence. In these prints, there is a visible saturation which renders any additions redundant and disruptive to the wholeness and fragile coherence of the

compositions. In this sense the heads fall outside the barest essentials, the essence.

Another explanation, which is directly related to this, is that the prints are action-designated, as already pointed out. The locus of signification, in all the prints, is in the area of the hand-in-the-act, located against an empty space to further its conspicuity. This structure is presaged in the 1979 'Coffee Time' which, as we saw, shows only the hands and no other parts of the body. The torso enters in the subsequent works only to define gender, and so, having shown a figure in an act, a woman, anything else becomes redundant, including the head. It could then be argued that the absence is not a comment on feminine attributes, but a precise compositional manipulation which focuses attention on the locus of signification and precises essence.

What then is it about the activities in which the artist engages these women; mending, tasting, reading, drinking coffee?

Before we attempt an answer to this, let us again look at another thorny question which issues from yet another observation. In the study, 'Coffee Time', the hands we see constitute an empty, or white, space. After this study, however, all the other works show the figures in positive, or black shape. From the moment that the breasted torso entered to define gender, we notice a blackening of the hands as well, and this runs consistently through the portfolio, except in one case, 'Reading' in which the hands are left white. The consistency of the feature we point to begins to suggest a conscious introduction of another visual code, like the gender we identified above. And what is suggested here, is a race code, in the colour Black. When these two codes are cojoined, the emerging figure is convincing: the Black woman.

If one should relate this to the atmosphere of the compositions, which is an

interior, it could be said that the figure is precisely located. The question then arises as to the significance of the one central exception in the series, the figure in 'Reading' which fails to fit with the rest, and by the codal pattern we have drawn, emerges as racially distinct, as a white female. How does this designation relate to the particular activity in which the artist engages her, in broad relation to those of the other figures, the Black figures? To push reading along this line is to watch an uncomfortable polarisation emerge, a dichotomisation which uncannily fits into a long tradition of stereotypes and, from the prints, could be drawn up thus:

black	white
mending	reading
tasting	
lone	

By the schema above, the area of the intellect or of visceral activity and ability is apportioned to the white female, while the manual/menial is reserved for the Black female. This immediately calls to mind an important subject, one which is wont to be suppressed in discussions of representations of women in art, and indeed in other arena, which is that of racist diparities. Black feminist scholars have of course addressed this consistently.[23] In Western art, specifically, the objectification of the female, which occupies white, feminist criticism,[24] also ensures that the representations of the black female, which consistently place her in positions of subordination and inferiority even to the white 'female-object', is neatly ignored. The schema we have elicited above becomes indeed doubly problematic because it suggests a discourse of subordination of the black female to the white female by a

black male.

Again, Egonu's views on race, as already surveyed in an earlier chapter, do not outwardly support this reading. Neither is it completely dismissable. The question here would be as to the logicality of the insinuations above, that is, of a black male with strong convictions on the equality of races constructing a schema which surbodinates the black female to the white female. In a sense, the artist's marriage to a white female makes this slightly more significant, especially when it is recalled, as we did elsewhere, that such other prominent figures of the Black Romantic or Negritude movement as Senghor and Cesaire equally married white females. The relationship of the Black male/white female, which continues to resurface in cultural and political discourse, is of course much deeper and complex than convenience would allow many discussants. Fanon's pioneer work on the subject, however, takes the discourse to a level which further highlights the relevance of the above insinuations.

In his seminal work, *Black Skin, White Masks*,[25] Fanon shows how a Black male's longing for the white female issues from recesses of the colonial psyche ordinarily inaccessible to the victim-perpetrator. This, according to him, is in turn built on a deep-seated, residual yet enduring, inferiority, which mental or neurotic state fuels a subconscious longing for white approval, and one safe route to approval is through gaining the acceptance of the white female. Fanon insists that this does not necessarily surface in the victim's ordinary life or his dedication to, in some cases, fairly assertive and essentially contradictory convictions, and often informs a certain universalist predilection.[26] One finds this in Senghor's fanatical dedication to the concept of *culture universale*, despite his equally fanatical dedication to Negritude,

and, quite ironically, in Fanon himself.

Within this structure of subconscious self-immolation and rejection, which Fanon calls the "negative-aggressive" complex, it becomes clear how the Black psyche which seeks the white female - because she represents a superior caste - would necessarily perceive the black female as inferior to her. And one traditional index of this superiority is the intellectual predilection, which, as we saw, Renoir allocates only to the white male. It is logical, then, that it is here extended to the white female, and denied the Black female. And the act needs not be conscious, even within the run of a very methodical body of work, though this articulatedness makes its occurence the less coincidental.

If the code we elicit in these works, and have tried to scramble, is invalid, then the entire contruct we have erected around it on this count collapses. It is only sensible to re-emphasise that the exercise is mainly a speculative one, which is what reading is about. One tendency in critical or art historical enquiry, in such matters, is to seek the artist's word. The danger here is that this inhibits the exercise of appreciation, and returns the work to the enclosed space of the artist's vision. It also precludes the insinuation of the subconscious on the creative process by working solely on the level of the logical construct which the artist's mind inscribes. In essence, while the reading we have attempted here might contradict the artist's declared intent or personal transcription, none of the later sufficiently invalidates it except to the extent that we lean the internal logic of a work solely on the conscious and confessed. Egonu recognises the part of the subconcious in the creative process when in the 1966 conversation with Ms. Streicher he speaks of how sentiment can enter the conception of a work "at such a deep level that it can be the business of no-

one but the artist."[27] As if to contradict himself, he then opens the business of enquiry and speculation at this depth to the critic or historian by admitting that "all an artist can do is to explain about himself and how he works. There are other people who have devoted their lives to studying artists and their works, and these are in a better position to try to interpret artists' works."[28] Thus does he preempt the above alternative and reveal its shortcomings.

What we have dwelt upon so far might be considered only an aside, albeit a significant one, to the central statement of the series under consideration. If we have made so much of a single, out of order print with a figure whose two hands happen to be laid down in white, it is because it succeeds in initiating a relevant and sensitive discourse which only very close scrutiny can detect. Incidentally this level of attentiveness and critical scrutiny is lacking in the appreciation of work by 20th century African artists.

Let us return to the earlier question: what is the significance of the activities which the artist assigns these figures and to which he projects every attention? And what, precisely, is it they are engaged in? What circumstances are they occupying or projecting? What condition? Who or what do they stand for? Who are they?

There are no singularly valid answers to any of these questions. First, the pervading atmosphere, as noted earlier, is one of aloneness, of solitude. This, however, is qualified by that dominating presence which introduces a feeling of authority and control of space. It were as if to indicate that the figures in these prints are in their own environment. Are they matriarchs? Or otherwise domineering nannies? Though, as Patricia Collins has noted, domestics and nannies "may wield considerable authority" in their families of service, she also observes that they "know

[their] "place" as obedient servant[s]," as surbordinates[29]. We do not get that feeling from the figures in these works. These women are in their own spaces, at least physically if not socially or politically. There is no space for any other, and there is little feeling of transcience in their possession of the space.

Yet, there is an air of discomfiture, of entrapment and constraint, a feeling not of marginalisation but of restrictedness. The figures occupy the picture frame, especially in 'A Cup of Coffee in Solitude', in a manner that makes it too little or shrunk, without room for movement.

The activities they are engaged in are all defined in the continuous; mending, tasting, etc. Each is, in a sense, a state of expectation. There is a feeling of anxiety. Or otherwise of an absence, a sense of loss. This is strongest in 'Lone Eater', 'Lone Player', and 'A Cup of Coffee in Solitude'. Who is absent here? Who are these women missing/ expecting/ or barring. The last signifier is particularly relevant since, in 'A Cup of Coffee in Solitude' and 'Lone Eater', for instance, there is an equally arguable sense of contentment with the solitary state, one of a fulfilling condition of peace and quiet, of eventually 'owning' own space and savouring this state. In other words, it may not be loneliness we see, but solitude in the Storrian sense of "a return to self"[30], not a state of enforced solitude or alienation but that in which "the capacity to be alone is a valuable resource".[31]

In the past three decades women have known increasing empowerment and a growing reclamation of space, a process which Angela Davis finds much earlier among Black Women.[32] This process involves both control and enjoyment of own space, whether by dispensing with the spouse relationship or child-making, or through circumventing other structures of male control. In this context the ability to

be alone in own space, to indulge in chores for own satisfaction, even to drudge for self, is a positive gain. The cramping feeling which we insinuated above may indeed be a condition of struggle as women actively hold out the borders of this space, a process which is a struggle with its own tensions.

This, of course, is only one way of reading these images. Another is to pursue the path of signified alienation, longing, inadequacy, expectation, anxiety, disatisfaction, loss, a construct which, visually and socially speaking, can be validly constructed from the same images. They could indeed be seen as reflections on the ageism of industrial society which consigns elderly people to seclusion, solitariness, and boredom. And when all these are eventually linked up with the colour code we defined earlier on, the discourse is then located within the black community and focussed on the place and condition of the Black woman in society.

What we have done here is look at some of several possibilities, and this further deepens the *Domesticities*. The woman we see is as indeterminable as the artist and his intents, and as variably relevant and revealing as the later. At every level, despite their given simplicity and seeming unpretentiousness, these works actively defy any singular reading. In them, more than any other of his representations of women, the artist enacts a complex masquerading act which demands that the viewer continuously shifts places if he or she must catch a good and rounded glimpse.

Notes

1. Chidi Amuta, *The Theory of African Literature* [London: Zed Press, 1989] p. 66.
2. Bernard Myers, *50 Great Artists* [New York: Bantam Books, 1953] p. 30.

3. Beatrice Farwell, "Courbet's 'Baigneuses' and the Rhetorical Feminine Image" in Thomas B. Hess and Linda Nochlin, eds., *Woman as Sex Object: Studies in Erotic Art, 1730-1970* [London: Allen Lane, 1973] p. 73.

4. Aime Cesaire, *Cahier d'un Retour au Pays Natal* [Paris: Editions Presence Africaine, 1971] p.74

5. Olu Oguibe, 'Woman for the Body of Woman: Images of Women in the Paintings of Ben Enwonwu', unpublished seminar paper, University of Nigeria, Nsukka, 1988.

6. Hiltrud Streicher, 'Reflections of Uzo Egonu', unpublished interviews, 1966, p.40

7. Ibid., p.41.

8. Ibid., p. 41.

9. See also David Kunzle, "The Corset as Erotic Alchemy: From Rococo Galanterie to Montaut's Physiologies" in Hess and Nochlin, op. cit., pp. 100-101.

10. 'Reflections', p. 44.

11. Ibid., p. 19.

12. Linda Nochlin, *Woman, Art, and Power, and Other Essays* [London: Thames and Hurdson, 1991] p. 3.

13. bell hooks, *From Margin to Center* [Boston: South End Press, 1984] p. 29.

14. The woman in 'Guernica' is Mother Spain, not the women of Guernica. This way the harsh realities of the individual woman in war are marginalised in favour of the patriotic ideal, the national lament. The Motherland displaces the Mother. This, however, is possible when the artist is working from a position of relative emotional distance, acknowledged or not, as in Picasso's case. In Egonu's war work the depth of his emotional involvement, especially at certain moments in the course of the war, preclude contemplation at the grand, idealist, level with its essentially sexist Nation/Mother-Patriot/Son stereotypes.

15. See Elleke Boehmer, 'Of Goddesses and Stories: Gender and a New Politics in Achebe's Anthills of the Savannah', in K. H. Peterson and A. Rutherford, eds., *Chinua Achebe: A Celebration* [London/ Sydney: Heinemann and Dangaroo Press, 1991] pp. 102-112.

16. Atsango Chesoni, 'Ama The Movie: Questions without Anwers', *Africa World Review*, April 1992.

17. 'Reflections', p. 5.

18. Stewart Brown, *Lugard's Bridge* [Mid Glamorgan: Seren Books, 1989]

19. Barbara Erlich White, 'Renoir's Sensuous Women', in Hess and Nochlin, op. cit., p. 175.

20. Renoir wrote the preface to a translation of Cennino Cennini's 14th century treatise in 1911 and in it he venerated time-honoured ideals in art from Pompeii to Corot. See Michel Drucker, *Renoir* [Paris, 1944].

21. White, op. cit, p. 169.

22. Quoted in Francois Daulte, *Auguste Renoir Catalogue Raisonnets, Vol. 1, Figures 1860-90,* and in White, ibid., p. 171. There is of course Renoir's 'Girl Reading' [cc 1876] at the Louvre, but a close study of the painting quickly shows how its focus is on the lady's face and hairdo and the casual style of the work underlines the artist's attitude to the activity. On the contrary, Egonu effaces the figure in his treatments of the theme and attention is focussed inescapably on the activity and idea.

23. bell hooks, Patricia Hill Collins, Angela Y. Davis and several others.

24. Nochlin, White, Duncan, Pollock, Schapiro and others.

25. Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks* [London: Pluto Press, 1986, originally published as Peau Noire, Masques Blancs, France: Editions de Seuil, 1952]

26. Ibid., pp. 63-82.

27. 'Reflections', p. 38.

28. Ibid., p. 30.

29. Patricia Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment* [London: Harper Collins Academic, 1990]

30. Anthony Storr, *Solitude* [New York: Ballantine Press, 1988]

31. Ibid., p. 29.

32. Angela Y. Davis, *Women, Culture, and Politics* [London: The Women's Press, 1984] p. 3.

Chapter Eight

ANGUISH AND SOLITUDE

Four Landscapes and A Self-Portrait

Between 1979 and 1983, when Egonu's poor sight was at its worst, he did a series of gouache and ink studies or for painting and prints. Among these were four landscape studies in gouache called *The Four Seasons*, which he did in 1982 and showed at the Bhownagree Gallery of the Commonwealth Institute the same year, where they were well-received[1]. He later translated them, with fair faithfulness in scheme and design to the originals, into colour screen prints in 1983. The screenprints were shown at the Ana Gallery in Nsukka in 1985, and in the artist's print retrospective at the Black Art Gallery in 1986.

The four landscapes, as they would conventionally be described since they contain some of the traditional elements of landscape painting, and would indeed fall within the classical tradition[2], represent Winter, Spring, Summer and Autumn. It is not known in what chronological order the artist executed the gouaches or the subsequent prints, and we shall consider them in the above seasonal order.

One of the first things that catch attention in looking at these landscapes, is that they are conceived as a continuum belonging to one body, in other words as a single, composite tableau in four movements, which is unique in both artistic contemplation of seasons and in landscape painting and may only be found in contemporary painting in the form of portraiture, say in Stanley Spencer's 'Self-

Portrait 1913, 1936, 1959', or Andy Warhol's 'Sixteen Jackies', both of which follow and deal with the transient state.

The next is that they are composed not on the traditional axis of landscapes, that is, on the horizontal, or even on the near-square frame favoured by Gainsborough, for instance, but on the vertical or portrait axis. Remarkably, this departure is ultimately subverted and the horizontal frame restored when the entire tableau is brought together. In other words, as individual pictures they fall outside the traditional frame, but together they return to it.

The third is that individually they are not panoramic, as most landscapes are even when they limit their contemplation to a minuscule portion of an area which is then composed to create a fiction of extensiveness, as in Monet's 'Water-lilies', or a singular but vastly distributed element in the landscape, as in Paul Nash's 'Totes Meer' for instance. In each work there is the sparsest of elements, as in a sketch, but on a note of terse finish which recalls Miles Davis's *Sketches of Spain* in their minimalism of notes. In 'Winter' there is a tree and some shrubs, withered to bare branches as is the case in Winter. Then there is the bare snow, denoted in plane negative space, and in the close distance, an indication of an automobile 'buried' in the snow. The contrast is sharp and severe, the use of the descriptive or definitive motif as austere as in Achebe's narratives. The presences in the picture are therefore denoted only by the positive elements which are cast in double roles to not only delineate the snow but to represent it through this delineation. George Whittet related the gouache to Klee's use of line, known for its severity and the artists priorisation of the positive line as the essence of image.[3] A closer analogy would be to Uli body painting in the deft and delicate orchestration of line, positive and negative space, to

create a saturated and pleasing composition. Representation is reduced to essence. The others follow this pattern of a few, close-up elements which sufficiently define the subject and mood.

As said earlier, in conceptualisation and composition, the four pictures would belong to the classical tradition in Western landscape art, especially to the canon of the French seventeenth century landscapist Claude Gelee described by Kitson: "an open foreground... framing trees on one side balanced by an answering motive on the other, and a circuitous path taking the eye by easy and varied stages to a luminous distance." If the very last part of the latter quality may not apply to any of these pictures, the rest could be argued to apply considerably. In The Four Seasons, perhaps more than in any other of his works except a few from the same period such as 'Gramophone' or the early landscape drawings, Egonu exhibits his sharp awareness of the Western tradition in painting. It is this, among other things, that easily remove the pictures from the category of what Herbert Read derisively refers to as "Chinese wallpaper", despite the discernible and undeniable affinities between three of them [with the unequivocal exception of 'Winter'] and commercial wall-paper or summer textile decoration.

The fourth element is that the pictures possess, in no easily definable form, the other quality of great landscape which Read describes vaguely as "poetry". If one may attempt to define this quality and locate it in the pictures, we may then go back to the earlier observation that in them there is an economy of statement and a precision of description which distinguishes the poetic from the prosaic. Not only is there a notable absence of the narrative, tying the pictures to no literary or historical themes and locating at their centres only nature, the effectiveness of their evocation of the

different moods and stations which constitute their subjects imbues them with Read's "excess of poetry, a quality which poetry would express, but lacks the means."[4]

If one may be less vague, the works are characterised by a precise execution and signification which only poetry can aspire to. There is a cleanliness and serenity about them which are not necessarily essential of a landscape but which elevate them above many as celebrations of nature rather than mere backgrounds to incidents. In this sense therefore, on the scale of the evolution of landscape as a genre, they belong to the apex whereby the landscape is neither a backcloth for human presence, nor the silent and inadvertent icon of autonomist self-preoccupation.

It would also be noticed that all the four pictures reveal a view from above on an angle that does not offer a full bird's eye perspective. The very limited depth or recession in the compositions, in conventional terms, convey a sense of observation from an interior, especially one of relative height above the ground. The absence of any reference to the sky, especially in the gouaches [in the silkscreen 'Winter' the sky is indicated, with a dull sun], though it may not be intended, define a position neither at nor below the eye-level.

The above formal observations are of considerable symbolic and psychological significance in the contemplation of these pictures, the circumstances of their production, and their overall importance as statements or indicators of the artist's state of mind and philosophical dispositions.

Egonu's most colourful works were done in the seventies and eighties, and one explanation for this is that it was during this period that he worked with silkscreens which gave him opportunity to explore colour and gradations to their fullest in a manner not very easy with lithography or etching. It could be argued that the

polychromatic possibilities of this medium in turn influenced the paintings from the period, some of which, like the gouaches under discussion, were executed with intent to be translated into screenprints. One notices, however, that *The Four Seasons* are equally among the most colourful works executed by the artist within the specific period that they were done. But for 'Winter', which has the minimum distribution of colour in order to evoke the appropriate seasonal mood, the works vibrate with colour, and a warmth which is not particularly appropriate to the season, as in 'Winter', and can only be justified by the fact the artist's failing sight interfered with his monitoring of the colour schemes. There is a preponderance of yellow and orange which one does not normally identify with the English climate in the best of times.

Although Egonu has claimed that these works were inspired by observations[5], it is also known that he could hardly see when they were done and could not have observed the environment in its exact form. There is therefore a discernible discrepancy between the nature observed, which in his case would be fairly dull and close to dark seen through the cataracts in his eyes, and the nature portrayed which is too warm. In the brief on his work during this period, 'Painting in darkness'[6], he notes the he "could not see the colours clearly, but each time I had in my mind the colours which I had already composed in my memory and through my imagination and means of looking and trying to judge the colours, as mentioned before." His method for observing the consistency of his colours, as we noted in a previous chapter, was to roll a tube of paper and look at the colour portions through this. It is conceivable then, that his judgements were not particularly accurate and, dissatisfied with the level of brightness in the colours, he was tempted to add more warmth to them till he could perceive this through his unreliable sight.

What comes to mind here are Monet's 'Water-lilies', painted after his sight began to fail from 1908 due to cataracts. About one of these paintings Bernard Myers has observed that "its astonishing colour and splashing brushstrokes are in no small part due to Monet's failing sight."[7] The essential difference between the blind artist who has no perception of colour, and the partially sighted one who can see his colours but not clearly, is that the later has the greater tendency of trying to 'correct' the colour tone by moving it to the right of the scale as compensation for his poor perception. The reduced sensitivity to bright light induces an almost insatiate predilection for greater light and the undue warmth of three of *The Four Seasons* is largely due to this.

The effects of sight-defects on painters and their work is a well-studied subject. An interesting point here, though, is that while in Monet's Giveny Garden paintings, done shortly before the *Water-lily* series, and indeed in his 'Water-lilies: The Japanese Bridge' [1918-24], the predilection is for reds and browns, in *The Four Seasons* it is for yellow. Pickford has advanced a tentative theory of race-determined colour defect[8] based on data which suggests that non-European peoples are more prone to a blue/yellow defect whereby they mistake yellow and blue for neutral, and Caucasians to a green/red defect, which may explain Monet's use of reds in the garden paintings mentioned here. The blue/yellow defect may equally alternatively explain the preponderance of warm yellow and orange in *The Four Seasons,* although the artist was never diagnosed colour-defective. This is a possibility which may not be dismissed till a proper test disproves it.

The other significant difference between the work Egonu produced in his period of 'Darkness', as he describes 1979 to 1983, and those of Monet before his eye

operations, is that while there is a carefreeness in Monet's choice and application of colour as well as in his brush work, there is indeed greater control and precision in Egonu's. The fuzzy, crooked line of his earlier work disappears and in its place is an insistent, bold, and remarkably sharp line with precise edges, skin-tight organisation of elements, and a delicate and well-thought out balance. In the Domesticities which we looked at in the last chapter, and all other works from this period, there is no tendency toward the carefree or loose.

This suggests several possibilities. While Monet is known to have declared a carefree attitude to painting and life at the time of his eye problem and indeed from then till the end of his life[9], which explains the wild freedom in his painting, there is an indication of painful concentration in Egonu's sharpening of his methods. Differences in the age and circumstances of the artists of course come into their different perspectives. Monet's relative security and the fairly advanced age [he was sixty-eight when his sight failed] also meant he could make the transition into what Anthony Storr has termed 'The Third Period' of the artist's creative output when age, maturity, and the anticipation of death drive the individual farther into himself and unto his own concerns.[10] Writes Storr:

> Man is the only creature who can see his own death coming and , when he does,it concentrates his mind wonderfully. He prepares for death by freeing himself from mundane goals and attachments, and turns instead to the cultivation of his own interior garden. In old age, there is a tendency to turn from empathy toward abstraction; to be less involved in life's dramas, more concerned with life's patterns.[11]

This could appropriately be said of the ageing Monet who indeed equally cultivated, quiet literally, an outside garden. A parallel can be drawn with the last decade and the final works of Beethoven which Martin Cooper has described in the following words:

> Nothing is conceded to the listener, no attempt is made to capture his attention or hold his interest. Instead the composer communes with himself or contemplates his vision of reality, thinking [as it were] aloud and concerned only with the pure essence of his own thoughts and with the musical process from which that thought itself is often indistinguishable.[12]

When Beethoven created his last works he was of course about as old as Egonu was when he did *The Four Seasons*, but Storr concedes that he did indeed live into his 'Third Period', which could be explained not only by the fact of his accepted genius but also the fact that his deafness and unrelenting illness from the age of 30 meant he made an early passage into the last stage anticipating the end of life.

Egonu, on the other hand, was hardly on the verge of decline whether physically or creatively. He was at the height of his middle age, and arguably, of his career as well. But for the failing sight, he was not known to be otherwise medically handicapped in any manner. Six years earlier he had indicated that his work would subsequently move into a new phase. The resignation and carefree introspection which we see in Monet and Beethoven, and which Storr identifies with the final stage of a creative life, could therefore not be expected of Egonu's work at this time. Within, he was unwilling yet to withdraw from the public.

Let us look again at Storr's elaboration on the 'Third Period':

> Third period works share certain characteristics. First, they are less concerned with communication than what has gone before. Second, they are often unconventional in form, and appear to be striving to achieve a new kind of unity between elements which at first sight are extremely disparate. Third, they are characterised by an absence of rhetoric or any need to convince. Fourth, they seem to be exploring remote areas of experience which are intrapersonal or suprapersonal rather than interpersonal.[13]

Hardly any of these could be said of Egonu's work during his 'Darkness' period. If *The Four Seasons* agreeably show no overt intent to communicate or declaim, many

of the other works from that period clearly do. Second, the unconventionality of these works derives, as we suggested, not necessarily from the artist's psychological state as from his physical handicap. There is of course an absence of rhetoric from *The Four Seasons*, but hardly any of the artist's work since the war years could be argued to contain rhetoric. It is not only absent from the *Addiction* series, topical as they are, but also from the religious works and the subsequent bodies of work. And we have already noted that incoherence or carefreeness do not in the least qualify the work from the 'Darkness' period, including *The Four Seasons*.

What we do notice then, is that Egonu's partial blindness, though it did place a further physical remove between him and the outside, giving his natural solitariness, did not as yet mark a transition into the age of complete withdrawal from the outside or a resignation to the vicissitudes of nature and fate, as in Monet or Beethoven. Yet *The Four Seasons* contemplate nature on a fairly personal, poetic level. In the statement quoted above on the artist's inspiration for the series, he defines a relationship between himself and nature which suggests a closed-off communication which excludes the inter-personal. *The Four Seasons* is his discovery of nature, a conversation which involves no one else. In a sense, then, it comes close to the fourth of Storr's characteristics, namely, to explore purely personal experience without the intervention or consideration of the outsider. There is a note of solitudinal internalisation here, a serene adventure which proscribes the raucous presence of the public. It is the artist's private reverie, reminiscent of Constable's insistent desire to retire to the countryside, to "take up my Viol de Gamba and walk off to some sweet Village where I can paint landskips and enjoy the tag End of Life in quietness and ease."[14]

However, Egonu's own comments on *The Four Seasons*, are noteworthy. In the release from the London Press Service announcing the exhibition of *The Four Seasons* at the Bhownagree in 1982, Egonu is quoted as saying: "In my paintings and other works, I am trying to capture the chaos, yet beauty and discipline, of the changing face of nature."[15] The release rightly prefixes this statement with reference to *The Four Seasons*, since, frankly, it could only be applied to a very little body of Egonu's work. The most significant point here is the artist's interest in the dialectic between chaos and discipline in nature, and what this easily relates to is the parallel dialectic between the disintegration of his visual abilities and his own internal will to persevere with creative work. He described his passage through the period as "pulling through"[16], and mentions that blindness signals material insecurity for an artist who lives by his work. All these point to an initial shock as his sight failed him, a period of anxiety, and a struggle within to overcome and survive.

In *The Four Seasons*, then, what we see is a reverse signification of internal anguish in the form of an outward projection of warmth and happiness, and in this a battle to subvert a loss. There is indicated here a fight with personal adversity rather than a resignation or valedictory. While on the one end we have *The Four Seasons*, contemplating nature and indicating moments of high spirit, as we also see in the highly witty 'Flute Player Resting', on the other we find from the same period such other works as the ink drawing, 'Man with Stick' which, though without allegory, contemplates and powerfully evokes the anguish of blindness.

The Four Seasons represents the dialectic between anguish and assertive humour, between anxiety and brave tranquillity. They are not isolated in framing discourse to seemingly exclude all but the artist and his subject. One would find this

in a good number of the artist's work from other periods, in his nudes, for instance, in his sacrificial cocks, and in his interiors. In this sense they do not delineate a particular period or peculiar phase in his creative development, less Storr's 'Third Period'. Neither may they be seen to represent any grand philosophical discourse in the direction that the artist indicated in his statement about the 'chaos and discipline' in nature, beyond what we have already identified. The discipline we see in the works is not necessarily existent in nature, nor is there discernible signification of chaos here. The precision/discipline is essentially a fiction manufactured and imposed to reflect, both practically and psychologically, the artist's own state. His poor sight required a closer, more scrupulous handling of method and material in his works, and the forcible hedge which it must have imposed on his interaction with his surroundings found a parallel in the preclusion of a free-wheeling application of media. A naturally meticulous individual, the uncertainty of poor vision further heightened his attention to detail and predilection to exercise careful control over his work.

Also, if an artist in his 'Third period' can afford care-freeness and the indiscretions of what I have described elsewhere as 'the artist as a sacred cow', there is every indication that Egonu felt he could not afford this. The financial anxiety he betrays when he points to the dispositions of an artist who survives by his work meant he could not yet embark on a dismissive phase in his work. And it is revealing that a new professionalism reentered his work at this stage, earning him a number of international honours and prizes. Monet's works from his 'Third period' have been highly praised, and Beethoven's are reputed as perhaps his greatest, but neither of these experienced the professional spotlight which the ailing Egonu received during

his 'Darkness' period. Analogies therefore seem less and less tenable.

Rather than resignation, withdrawal, self-alienation, solitudinal internalisation, Egonu's *Four Seasons* show a momentary leap over anxiety and anguish. The vacillations between anguish and light-heartedness which define the 'Darkness' period hardly ceased or transformed before a new period of anxiety and anguish would commence for the artist.

Between 1983 when he had the second operation to restore his sight, and 1985 when this second period began, his production was not phenomenal or significantly different from the work of the 'Darkness period' since much of it was developed from preliminary studies and colour sketches already laid down between 1979 and 1983. The prints shown in his exhibition in Nsukka in 1985 were mostly work from the 1979-83 period and some earlier ones, and between 1982 and 1985 he had no one-man shows.

Ironically, it was during his 1985 show at the Galerie Neue Horizonte in Frankfurt Maine that his second period of anguish began when he went down with a heart failure. After considerable recuperation in Bedburg, he returned to London only to have a repeat in 1986. He was given less than a year to live by the doctors.

He has always referred to this as his 'traumatic experience'. With it came a period of deep solitude, real if momentary withdrawal, and the resigned anticipation of death which defines a 'Third Period'. This time his source of anxiety was no longer his career or means of livelihood. The reality of imminent death became concrete and according to him, he signed previously unsigned paintings and sketches, and arranged his papers and estate in preparation.

Needless to say, Egonu survived doctors's projections, and this restored his

defiant spirit. However, not only did his life style change in terms of new health routines and taste, what he has described rather hyperbolically as "a new lease of life"[17], his art also witnessed a gradual but marked change from 1986. While in Bedburg hospital in 1985, he made a pencil sketch which signalled this new phase. Titled 'Uncompleted Journey', the small sketch was made after a dream in which he saw himself travelling an unfamiliar terrain, as if away from the living, a particularly feverish dream which left him palpitating when he awoke. He was drawn back from the trail of the dream by Hiltrud. Symbolically, he had been rescued and brought back to life. His mission as an artist, was unfinished, or at least he felt this was the message of the dream.

The remainder of this journey, however, would be his to do. It was now time to return to himself and explore life on a more personal and wizened level, not precluding entirely the artist's public or social responsibilities as he had defined in his previous work, but creating room for a renewed philosophical contemplation of the self. After concluding work on the series, *Stateless People*, he moved off the stage of preoccupying social commentary. The group and the type equally left his body of signification, as if to denote this transition from the public arena to the private. The next cycle of work which he began in 1987 was a series of single head studies belonging to a new series equally dubbed *A New Lease of Life*. In each study the support is taken up entirely by a huge and emphatic head, stylistically disfigured, and affined to the manner of figural representation in *Will Knowledge Safeguard Freedom*. The thick, fuzzy and textured line of his work, which made its return in *Will Knowledge Safeguard Freedom*, is also present, as opposed to the clean, precise line in the *Domesticities*, for instance, or his other work from the 1970s.

The flat colour area found in the screenprints and replicated in the paintings from the seventies and early eighties, is equally replaced by the feel for texture found in the early work of the mid-sixties and in some of the work in the *Freedom* series. In the 1987 paper studies beginning this new series the work is in black ink. Stippling and tonking and the use of knife all return, as in the work of the mid-sixties. Only, the subject this time is the head, the countenance, the individual, the singular face and its vagaries. One begins to sense the internalisation which Storr identifies with the valedictory period of the artist's life when the objects of his concern differ from those of his previous work and, though they may relate to his earliest preoccupations, do so in a different manner and on a different level. This is the period of defiant, self-contemplating, self-gratifying solitude when the artist looks at the world for himself, for his own satisfaction. If the artist's career is fairly accomplished or satisfactory, the aim is no longer to declaim but to appreciate, not to improve on style or technical proficiency, but to seek the pleasures of one's own preoccupations. If his place is contestable this is the period of defiant staking of claims or scornful dismissal of the unappreciative critical establishment or an insensitive public.

The defiant solitude and self-assertion of this period is summed up in Egonu's self-portrait of 1989, the only one of the artist's works which directly identifies him as its subject. Egonu divides the support between himself, the painting, a huge canvas, the studio, and the outside which he is painting. Carefully planned as usual, the composition masterfully lays out elements to fill in every section of the work, which partly explains the position of the artist's palette, held down to his right while he wields a brush in his right hand in a particularly confident, even confrontational stance. The outdoors which the artist paints is dark, with an outline of tangled

vegetation reminiscent of winter. The studio and the canvas are floodlit, and there is room for a some decorative motives. The entire painting is in violet chiaroscuro, and although the application of colour creates a grainy, disintegrating texture, elements are emphatically put down.

Two things stand out about this painting, beside what is already described. The first is that the artist and his work are barred in by padlocked metal gates. The second is that the artist faces the viewer full from his waist up, as if momentarily called to attention from his preoccupation, on one hand, and on the other, as if posing for a quick press photograph. In this position he backs the outdoor scene and the canvas, and faces the grid. When one looks closer, though, it becomes clear that he is indeed integrated into the painting on the canvas, with a branch of the foliage painted directly into his face and across one eye, as well as on the torso. There is therefore a case of multiple registration, with the outdoor scene replicated on the canvas and on the artist, just as the canvas is worked into the artist's own image and helps constitute him, recalling in some sense Salvador Dali's 1933-35 portrait of Mae West.

Details of the artist's countenance are however not very clear. There is a recognisable semblance, but photographs from 1989 show that the figure in the painting is not a mirror image. The artist's slight bald is missing here, and the face is slightly podgier than life. The beard is almost self-consciously fashion-trimmed. The look in the eye is neither a stare nor are the eyes down-cast. Instead there is a blankness which defines the eyes not as tools of sight but as mere anatomical features. One recalls here David Bomberg's position on *the eye* which he regarded as a stupid organ by itself.[18] The eye here does not look, it does not regard, it does not

register. It is absent and useless. Its uselessness is re-emphasised by the position and direction of the artist in relation to his canvas and his subject which he backs, and the fact that these relate with each other and auto-replicate seemingly without his seeing them, though not without his manipulation which is symbolised in the poised brush. Here Egonu seems finally to scorn the threat of blindness during his 'Darkness' period, and to posit a theory of creativity without physical vision. Creativity is defined as a mental activity, an act of the imagination[19], just as the artist is also portrayed as a vehicle of the creative impulse. The image of the outdoor on his canvas is there through both his conscious, manual application of paint, and by impinging itself upon his perception and the canvas. As the painting shows, the scene grows into him and into the picture. A pattern of unity is established between nature, the artist's mind, and the work of art. And it is this unity that marks the artist's moment of maturation, and true accomplishment. To successfully realise the ultimate unification of nature or subject, imagination, and art, is the dream of every artist.

The subject of Egonu's work is seen here to have moved from fulfilling the duties of the artist to contemplating the philosophical questions of nature and the creative imagination. Here one identifies a shift, as Storr rightly points out, from preoccupation with "life's dramas [to preoccupation with] life's patterns." Yet this solitudinal introspection is not a vain self-celebration. In Egonu's self-portrait the artist is a prominent element, but this prominence is shared with his tools and his subject. It is these that define his being.

In his 'Painter at Work' [1979], another 'painter's self-portrait', an artist subverts the disjunctions of objective reality to unite his image on canvas with his working self. The image on the support is the same painting in that image, not a

reflection or representation, but the same, and the painter takes his time to fashion his image, which is himself, into a satisfactory one. The frame of reference is the image as painted. There is no artistic being beyond the image presented, the public, professional, mask. The figure, though indeterminate, is however precisely registered and sharply delineated so as to project prominently. It is the centre of the picture, and though the artistic act is represented in the painter's working hands, its place is to define the presence of the artist himself, shown with his pipe.

This picture belongs within a tradition of painters's self-representations in Western art from the High Renaissance to 20th century Modernism, and especially in the work of such artists as Durer, Rembrandt, Courbet and Cezanne, and indeed in Stanley Spencer's, which locate the artist at the centre. It recalls especially the irreverent self-portraits of Courbet's youth which place him on stage and in their time earned him the ire of the Salon in Paris again and again. And though Egonu's 1989 self-portrait also places the artist in the centre, and defines his being through his work, it differs from 'Painter at work' and from this tradition by extending the relationship beyond the artist and his work to explore his position in a wider relationship, between subject and the work. It identifies a different subject outside of the artist, and refrains from celebrating the artist. He is presented not as a fabricator of images, including the self-image, but as an image defined as much by his subject as he determines the form of his subject's replication or representation in the work of art.

The figure in the 1989 self-portrait is hardly insistent, though the head is backlit by the white of the support behind it. Its grayness which unifies it with the studio and the outside, and its entanglement with the emergent image on the support

all indicate that there is little self-celebration here. Nor is there much carefreeness or the bravado which does not indeed come with the valedictory stage of a creative life as might be suggested by Storr, but with the exuberant predilections of youth. And one more element deserves closer attention; the ironwork mentioned earlier which bars the artist inside.

This symbol of confinement indicates that the artist's solitude is in a sense forced, in this case by his failing health rather than advanced age or creative decline. It symbolises the new lease of life which does not indeed signify a period of ease but one of submission to the demands of physical decline. One of the paintings from this period is titled 'The man who does not listen to advise' and in a sense plays on the dangers should the artist defy the regulations of his new life with its recommended diet and routines of exercises. In his paper on the period referred to earlier, Egonu writes:

> There is a time in one's life that a change in life style either has to be voluntary, or circumstances might compel a change. A person may detest exercise or walking, prefers [sic] butter to low cholesterol margarine, likes drippings... but circumstances, due to the consequences of that particular life style which affects the health, may wipe out all the detestations... Either you keep to the old ways and bear the consequences, or you follow a new way...[20]

The indication of confinement in the self-portrait , therefore, does not signify a situation parallel to, say, Courbet's imprisonment which one sees in his Sainte-Pelagie prison self-portrait of 1871, or the environment of the *Stateless People* series. It only refers to the forced confinement which marked the artist's convalescence from the illnesses of the mid-eighties and his transition into the valedictory period of his work. And in defining the solitude of the period as initially forced, the symbol also indicates that Egonu's 'Third period', though it may mature into self-celebration,

began with anguish and remains marked by a battle to refrain from undertakings that may prove hazardous to the artist's health. It is therefore hardly a period of resignation nor of carefree dismissal of the outside, much as it has brought solitude and the mental frame to contemplate deeper, the complex relationship between the artist, the subject, and the work, which we see in the 1989 self-portrait.

Notes

1. See chapter three for critic's remarks.

2. In *British Art: From Holbein to the Present Day* [London: The Tate and Bodley Head, 1989] Simon Wilson qualifies the classical tradition in landscape painting as 'imaginative' and occasionally historical, while the narrative or 'natural', that which represents a particular and existent scene, he describes defines as 'topographical'.

3. See chapter three.

4. Herbert Read, *The Meaning of Art* [London: Pelican Books, 1949] p. 115.

5. In the introduction to the catalogue for his 1986 Print Retrospective at the Black Art Gallery, Egonu is quoted thus: "the autumn and winter of 1982 revealed to me what nature can place before an artist who, like me, has nearly lost his sight."

6. Egonu, 'Painting in darkness 1979-1983', undated manuscript, p. 2. Artist's private papers.

7. Bernard Myers on Monet's 'Water-lilies: The Japanese Bridge', oil on canvas, 1918-24, Myers, *Methods of the Masters: Monet* [London: Brian Todd Publishing House Limited, 1990] p. 112.

8. R. W. Pickford, 'Defective Vision and Art' in Don R. Brothwell, ed., *Beyond Aesthetics* [London: Thames and Hudson, 1976] pp. 135-1136.

9. Myers, *Methods of the Masters: Monet.*

10. Anthony Storr, *Solitude* [New York: Ballantine Books, 1989] p. 169.

11. Ibid., p. 169.

12. Martin Cooper, *Beethoven: The Last Decade* [London: 1970] p. 11.

13. Storr, op. cit., p. 174.

14. Thomas Gainsborough, letter to William Jackson, quoted in Simon Wilson, op. cit., p. 40.

15. 'Africa's Top Artist Shows in London', London Press Service, August 1982.

16. Egonu, 'Painting in Darkness', p. 2.

17. In Egonu, "The Circumstances leading to the creation of the work", undated paper. Artist's private papers.

18. Recalled in Peter Fuller, *Beyond the Crisis in Art* [London: Writers and Readers Publishing Cooperative] p. 145

19. Cf. The artist's evocation of memory and the imagination in 'Painting in Darkness'.

20. 'The circumstances leading to the creation of the work.'

Chapter Nine

CONCLUSION

There are no comprehensive histories, only semblances of completeness. What we have discussed in this study are only aspects rather than the entire range of Egonu's work and interests. And the broadness of his thematic and aesthetic preoccupation is not unique to him but applies equally to very many other 20th century African artists, and indeed to most artists generally.

The failure of frames of comprehension in the study and discussion of 20th century African art resides in the inability or reluctance of most such frames to recognise the plurality of artists's interests, inclinations, sources and influences, and experiences. In trying to fit these artists and their work into little, convenient frameworks their essential multi-facetedness is either ignored or obscured. Indeed some of them are conveniently left out of emergent histories because they exhibit in the variegated nature of their work and concerns a complexity which either ill-fits into working frames or invalidates them completely.

In 1989 the director and crew of the Smithsonian documentary on Nigerian art, *Kindred Spirits,* visited Egonu's studio in London and filmed hours of conversations and outdoor takes of his daily habits. When the documentary was eventually produced, neither was his name mentioned, nor was his art discussed. The only bit of the whole day filming in London that appeared was a second of decorative still.

Even that was not acknowledged in the credits.

Though an hour-long video like *Kindred Spirits* may not fall into the category of serious 'art historical' discourse[1], it fits within new forms of art history and documentation in an electronic age. A close study of the documentary, however, reveals points of importance. Although the level of discussion and manner of presentation are gauche and superficial, and the video fits into the category of fictions of completeness or omnibus, fire-side or television net-work histories mentioned above, it does not differ significantly from the more 'art-historical', supposedly scholarly rather than popular studies. Indeed the frames of discourse and chronological delineation are identical, and patterns of preference, by which we mean the approbation of certain forms of art and the disapproval or dismissal of others, are replicated in it. Neat, little circumferences of socio-historical cause and effect are *constructed*[2], and within these are the artists and their practice sectioned and closed off. The categories remain namely: 'neo-traditionalists', 'neo-functionalists', and 'the artist as social critic', all of which serve to feed the fiction of uniqueness, and ultimately of Otherness[3]. These delineations eventually acquire 'professional' legitimation, as in Vogel's *Africa Explores*.

In addition to the essential fictiveness of these categories and delineations, such art historical methods miss out the complexities of creative practice, as well as the reality of the individual creative presence.

Discourse around individual artists, at first count, plays into the hands of a position now seen as discredited in art history, namely, the argument for the individual creative genius. Part of the mission of the New Art History in Britain and later in America, in the seventies and early eighties was to return art and its

discourse to the ambit of a generative social and historical ambience supposedly superior to and indeed dominant over the individual creative labourer, the artist. Every facet of the creative entity including the most intimate and internal made sense only in so much as they related to, and existed within, originary social structures, and in the process of discrediting and rehauling what was perceived as a basically conservative discipline, ideologues delineated spaces of anathema and of acceptance.[4]

The anthropological history which has extended into the study of 20th century African art parallels the socio-historical methods of the New Art history in this subsumption of the individual artist. And because hardly any artist devotes his or her career to a singular thematic or stylistic pursuit, these methods disintegrate the individual practice so as to section it into relevant critical boxes. The more variegated the artist's *oeuvre*, the more difficult it is for these approaches to function, which partly explains the inclination of histories of contemporary African cultures to exclude uncomfortable and ill-fitting artists and their work.[5]

Egonu has fallen repeatedly into this category of 'difficult' artists and it is this, more than anything else, which explains what he has described as his 'invisibility'. The ethnographic bent of current methods in African art history fail to locate him and his work within their frames, and failing to do so, exclude them from discourse.

What 20th century African art deserves, however, are methods broad enough to encompass its diversity. Indeed, what is required is a multiplicity of frames, and this is the proposition of the masquerade theory advanced earlier in this study, namely, a combination of frames which recognise both the plurality of forms and the ineluctability of the individual work.

A meaningful study of Egonu's Domesticities, for instance, requires the tools

of vigourous feminist criticism, just as his war paintings need more than cheap and facile theories of 'post-coloniality' or 'neo-functionality'. His numerous flower paintings, some of which showed in the invitational exhibition of Flower Painters of the World in the seventies[6], defy models which rest on poorly conceived social-determinist theories around 20th century African artists.[7] For instance, to study the landscapes discussed in the last chapter requires, in addition to any others, models closer to Peter Fuller's psycho-analytical criticism and indeed to traditional 'Western' art history than to Mount's, Beier's, Jewsiewicki's or Vogel's. The artist's religious works, which occupied him throughout the early seventies, enunciate on so many levels they cannot possibly fit into singular frames of 'neo-traditionality' or 'cultural nationalism'. Nor have the emergent histories found adequate tools for the contemplation of expatriation and 20th century African art.

If the study of a singular artist and his work requires all or a combination of these and more, it becomes apparent how facile and myopic existing, monocular and deterministic frames can prove. To contemplate the study of an entire epoch, or indeed a century of this art with such frames, is anything but serious art historical preoccupation.

Literary criticism has progressively recognised this disjunction between the ineluctability of the art work irrespective of its provenance, the multi-dimensionality of the individual creative concern which Egonu's career exemplifies, and the neat, plexiglass critical boxes applied to 20th century African art.[8]

The challenge of emergent histories and criticism of visual art practice in Africa is to go beyond the cheap and convenient models now in use, to locate more contexts than usual, and to recognise that, as T. J. Clark wrote, although the work of art "may

become intelligible ... within the context of given and imposed structures of meaning, ... it can alter and at times disrupt these structures."[9] What we have done in the preceding chapters is to locate some of these contexts as a way of showing how necessary a plurality or conglomerate of such contexts are in the appreciation of the individual artist, and thus more so in the study of entire bodies of creative individuals and traditions. Successful art history must avail itself of a multiplicity of frames and positions, and recognise that a work of art, like the masquerade, defies the constraints of interpretation because it precedes its own interpretation,[10] and therefore cannot be fully apprehended from a singular, inflexible and totalising position. And if the singular work requires more than the monocular narrative, as we have insinuated all along in this study, then entire creative careers and epochs necessarily sprawl outside its thin walls. This is the relevance of the masquerade as a theory of appreciation.

Notes

1. That is, forms of art historical practice from within the academia or its peripheries, or from institutions of orthodox art historical practice in the modern Western tradition; museums, colleges, unreadable journals and huge, glossy catalogues typified by Vogel's large-type books or Ulli Beier's monographs.

2. We emphasise the word here to indicate the essential fictitiousness of these delineations, the fact that they are fabricated historical conveniences and do not exist of themselves.

3. The title of the documentary, taken from conversations with Obiora Udechukwu but ultimately decontextualised, equally serve this purpose of introducing to the American public the curious if 'more spiritual', perhaps 'more relevant', and 'communal' nature of the art in question, in cut-and-paste, do-it-

yourself patterns.

4. See A. L. Rees & F. Borzello, eds., *The New Art History* [London: Camden Press, 1986]

5. One would notice, for instance, that Egonu is equally excluded from the Vogel account of 20th Century African Art, just as is Nigerian photographer Rotimi Fani-Kayode whose work also falls outside the parameters detailed in Vogel's narration of 'African' photography.

6. Unfortunately we are unable to discuss this aspect of his work in this study, yet it forms a very important part of his practice.

7. For instance Susan Vogel's position that the 'ideologies that have guided International [African] artists have not been theories about art *per se*...[but] about political and social identity', and indeed her entire construction of the 'International' artist fall flat before this aspect of the artist's work. See Vogel, *Africa Explores* [New York: Center for African Art, 1991] pp. 176-197

8. Much as this area of cultural studies cannot be said to have transcended these holds completely, the increasing participation of African critics and intellectuals has brought a marked difference to bear on its tone and direction.

9. T. J. Clark, *Image of the People: Gustave Courbet and the 1848 Revolution* [Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1982]

10. And one is not in any way suggesting Susan Sontag's essentially anarchic repudiation of the validity of interpretation ['Against Interpretation' in *A Susan Sontag Reader*, London, Penguin Books, 1982, pp. 95-104]. What is wrong is not the exercise of interpretation, but the nature of this exercise, its pattern and frames. The 'description' of form is not enough, much as prescriptions are useless, and the narrative of premodial epochs free of the practice of interpretation is itself a presumptuous fiction. The masquerade as an art form and as a theory validates the exercise of discourse beyond mere description. It embodies contemplation at the level of codes and their possibilities. What it demands in addition is that the plurality of these possibilities be recognised.

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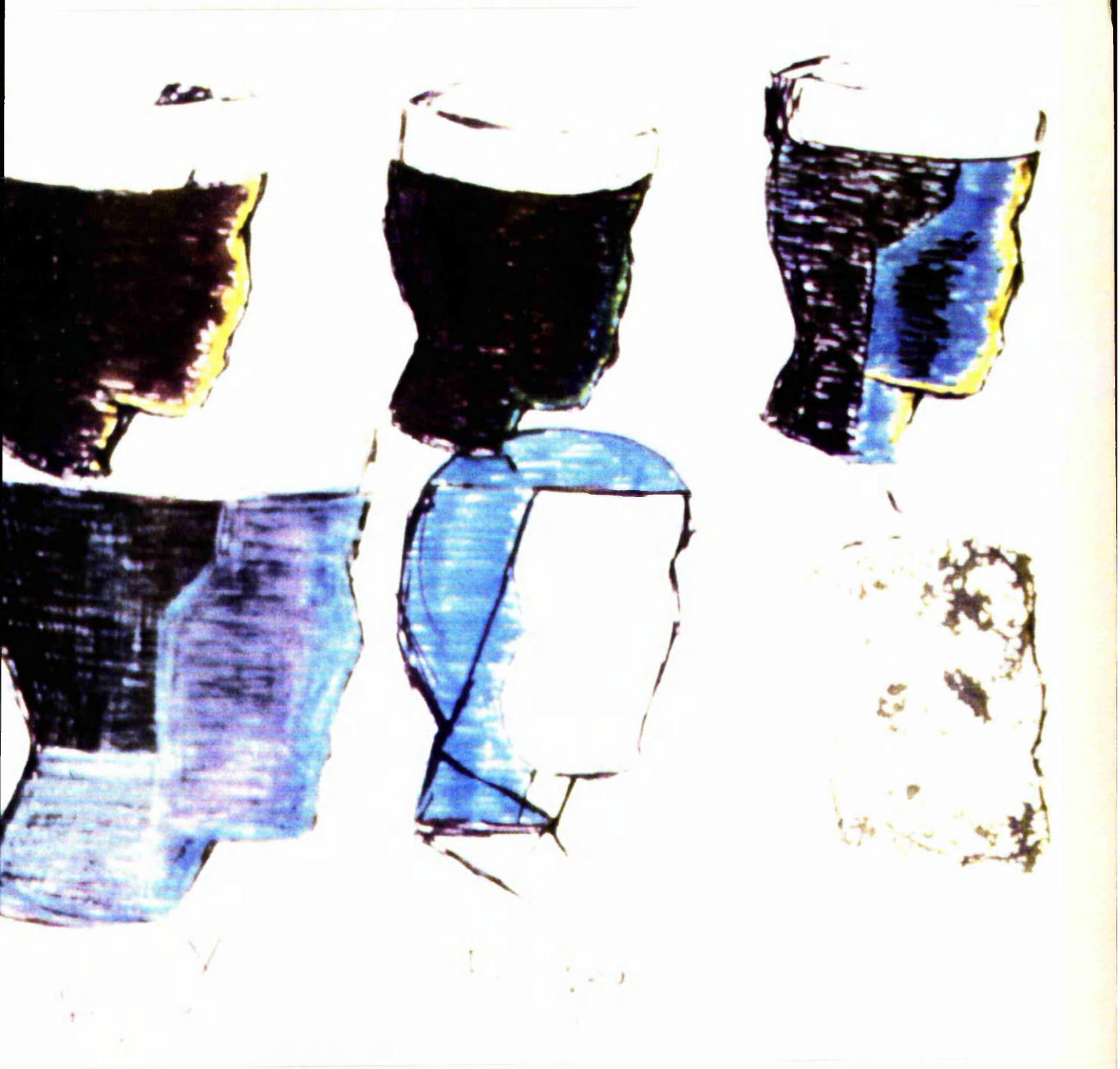
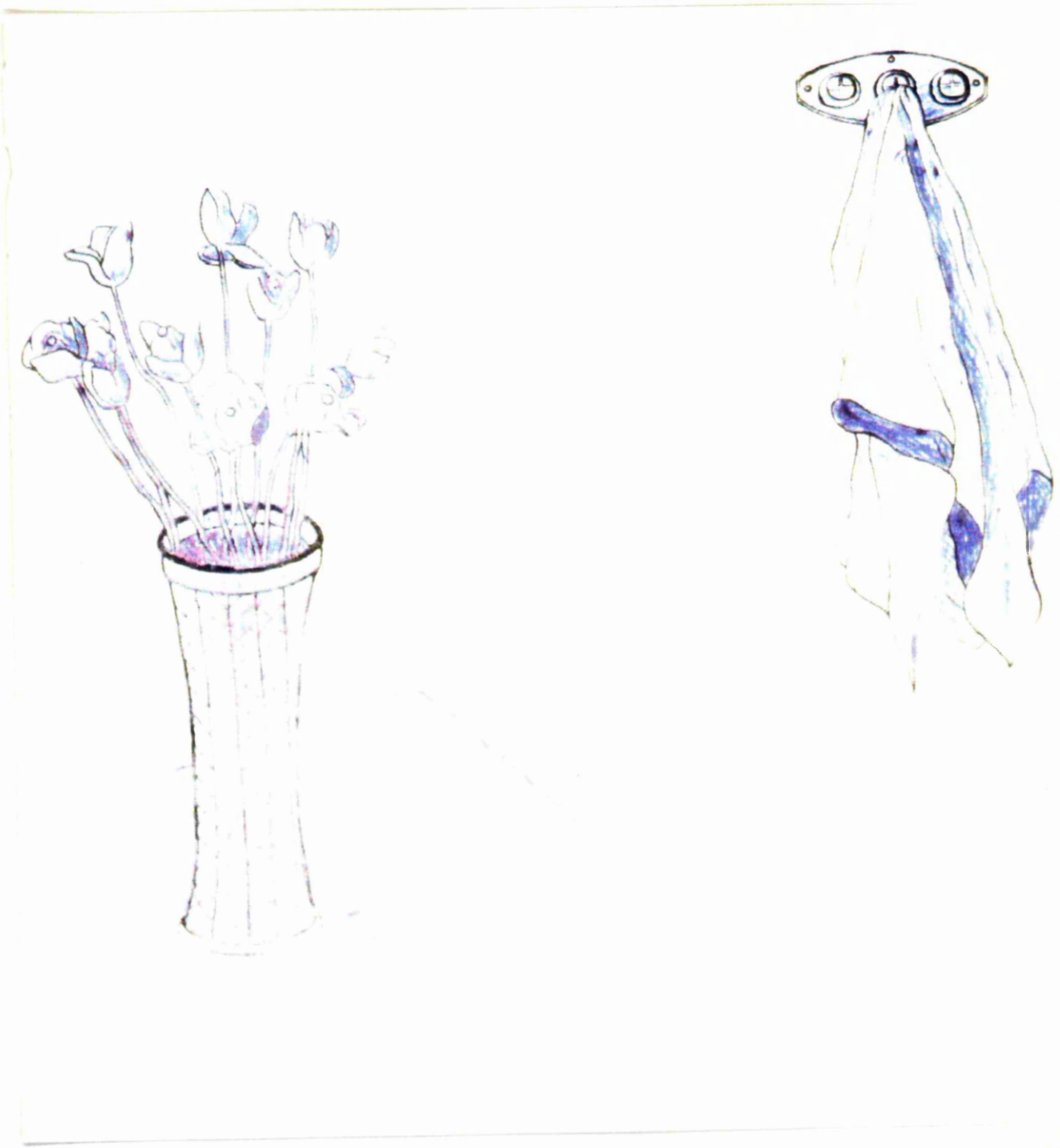
ILLUSTRATIONS

1. Egonu, Sketch for "Two Women Bathers", pencil on paper, 1958.

2. Egonu, "Still life in tropical garden", oil on canvas, 1959.



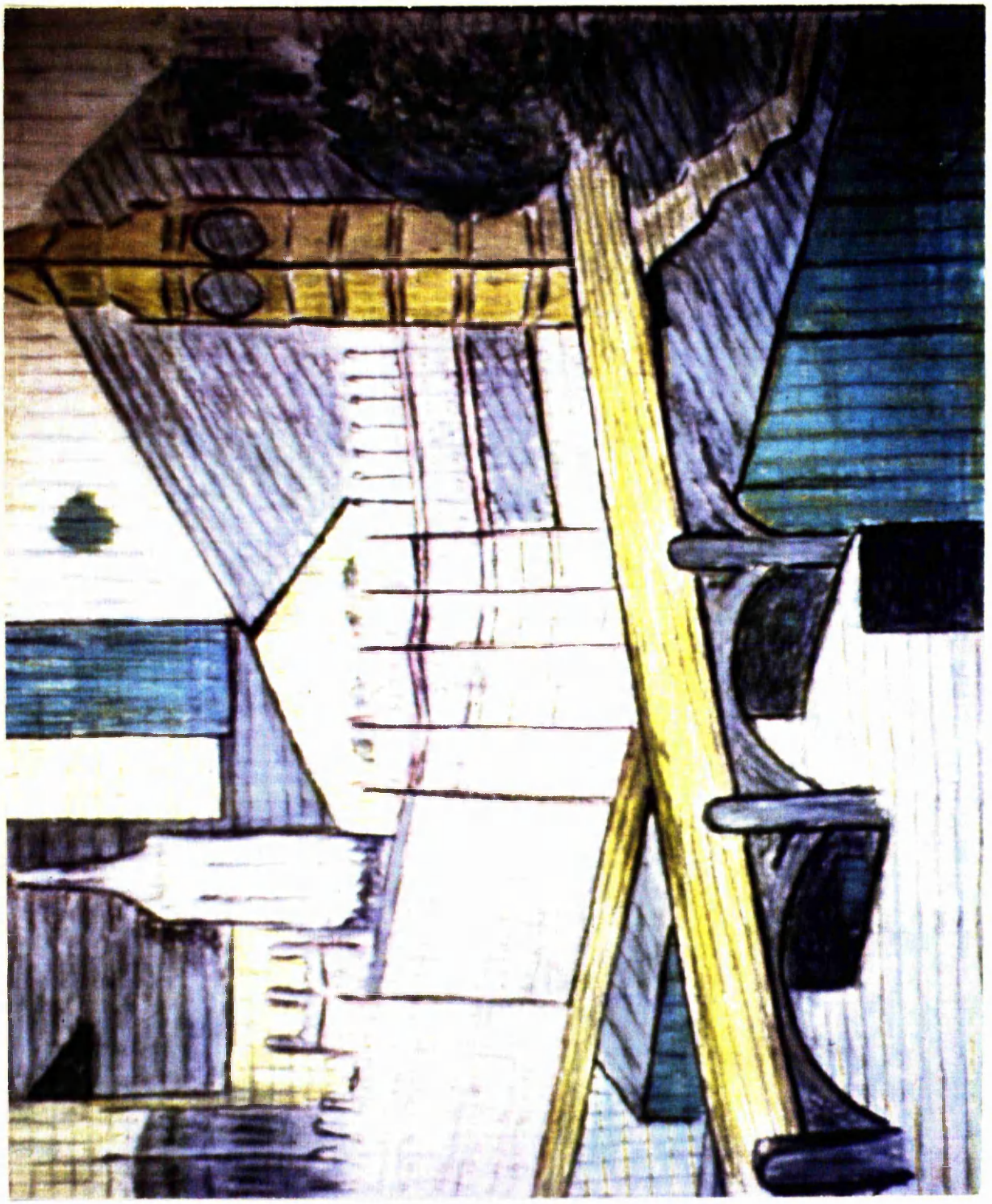
3. Egonu, Colour Studies, coloured pen, 1959.



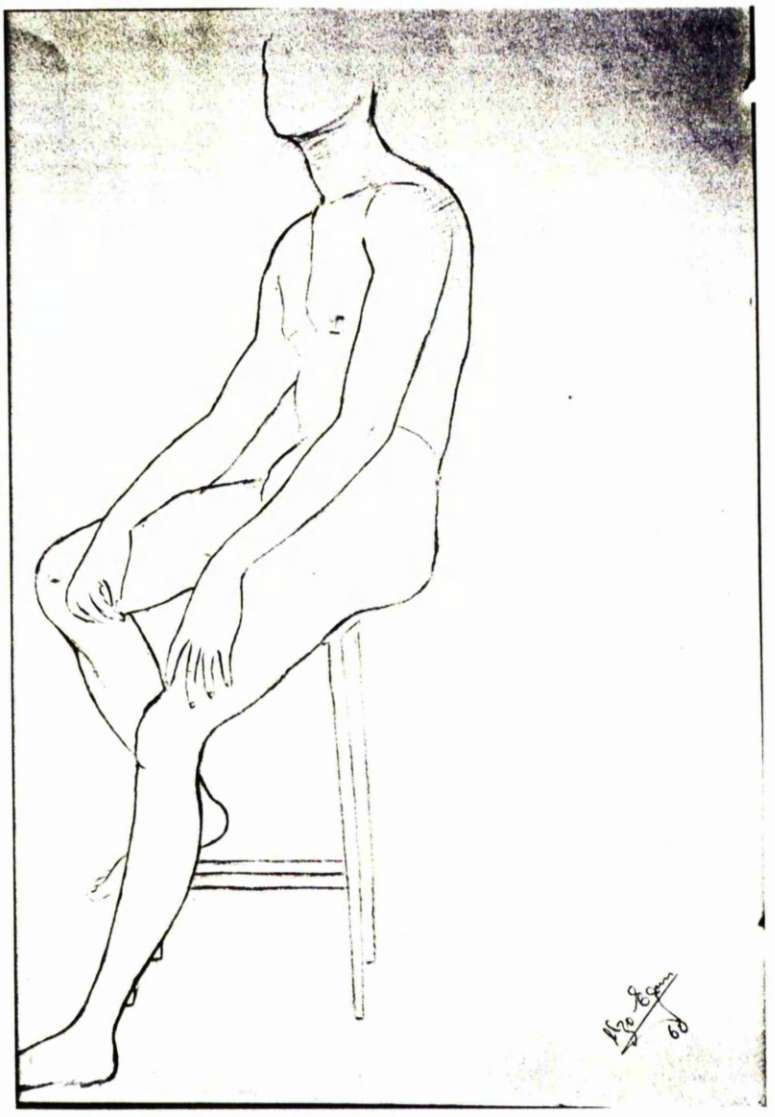
4. Egonu, Still Life Studies, 1959.

5. Egonu, "Village Blacksmith in Iboland", oil on canvas, 1961.

6. Egonu, Portrait of a Guinea Girl, oil on canvas, 1962.



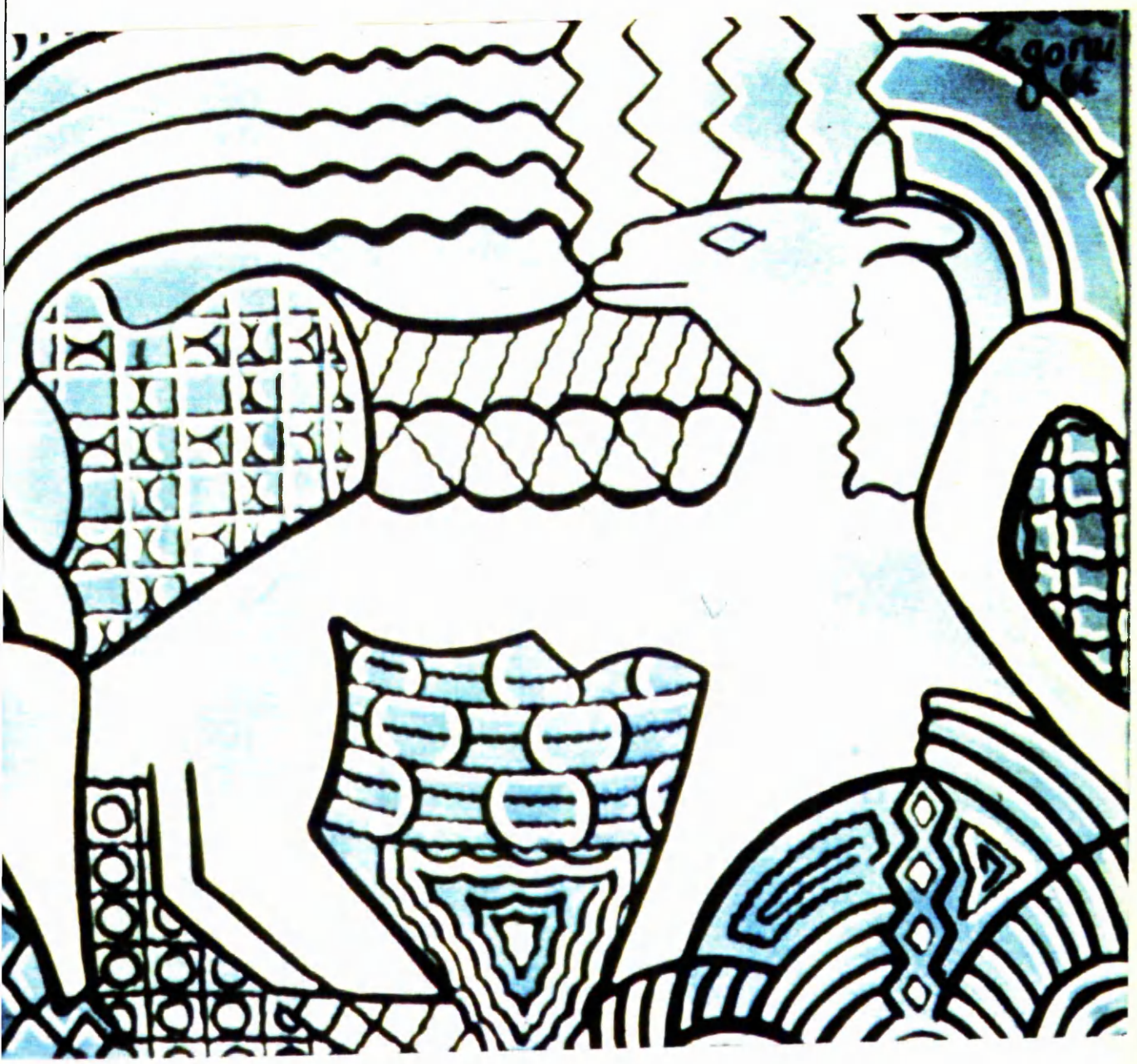
7. Egonu, Study of London Bridge, mixed media, 1963.



8. Egonu, Life sketches, pencil, 1963?

9. Egonu, "A Boy with a Budgerigar", oil on canvas, 1963.

10. Egonu, "Northern Nigerian Landscape", oil on canvas, 1964.



11. Egonu, "A Dog Named Lost", oil on canvas, 1964.

12. Egonu, "Pitcher", oil on canvas, 1964.

13. Egonu, "Fisherman Mending Net", oil on canvas, 1964.

13. Egonu, "Fisherman Mending Net", oil on canvas, 1964.

14. Egonu, "Nude Combing Her Hair", oil on canvas, 1964.

15. Egonu, "Woman with Umbrella", oil on canvas, 1965.

16. Egonu, "Woman before a mirror", oil on canvas, 1965.

17. Egonu, "Freedom of Goldie", gouache on paper, 1965.

18. Egonu, "Cheetah attacking its prey", oil on canvas, 1965.

19. Egonu, "Tiger", oil on canvas, 1965

20. Egonu, "Portrait of Hiltrud", oil on canvas, 1965.

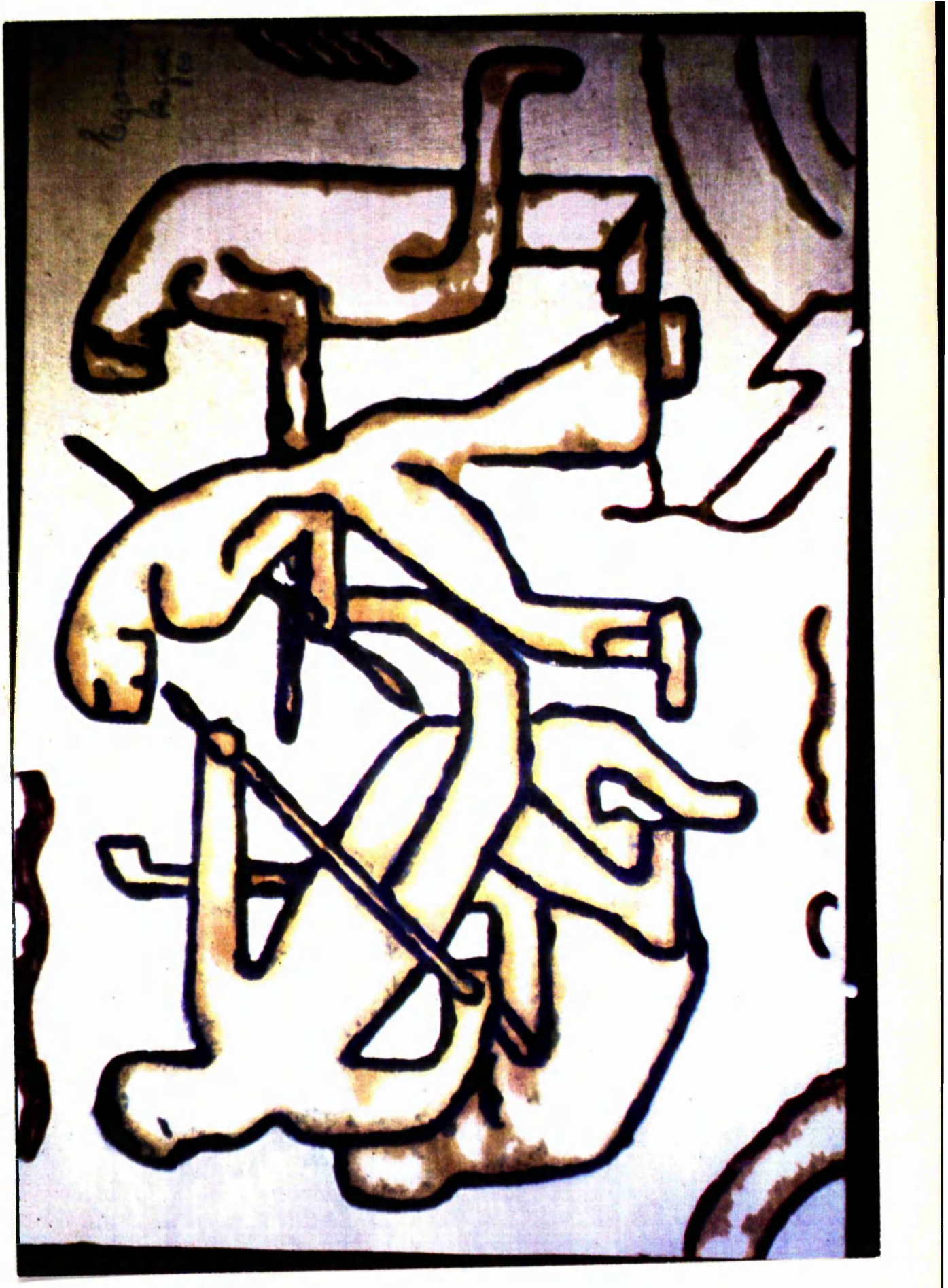
21. Egonu, "Leopard", oil on canvas, 1966.

22. Egonu, "The Workers", oil on canvas, 1966.

23. Egonu, "Universal Mosque", oil on canvas, 1966.

24. Egonu, "Sanctuary in the Chapel", oil on canvas, 1966.

25. Egonu, "Mother and Child", oil on canvas, 1966.



26. Egonu, "Battle", gouache on paper, 1966.

27. Egonu, "Flight", oil on canvas, 1966.

28. Egonu, "Blind Eye to Tragedy", oil on canvas, 1967.

29. Egonu, "The World in Perspective", oil on canvas, 1967.

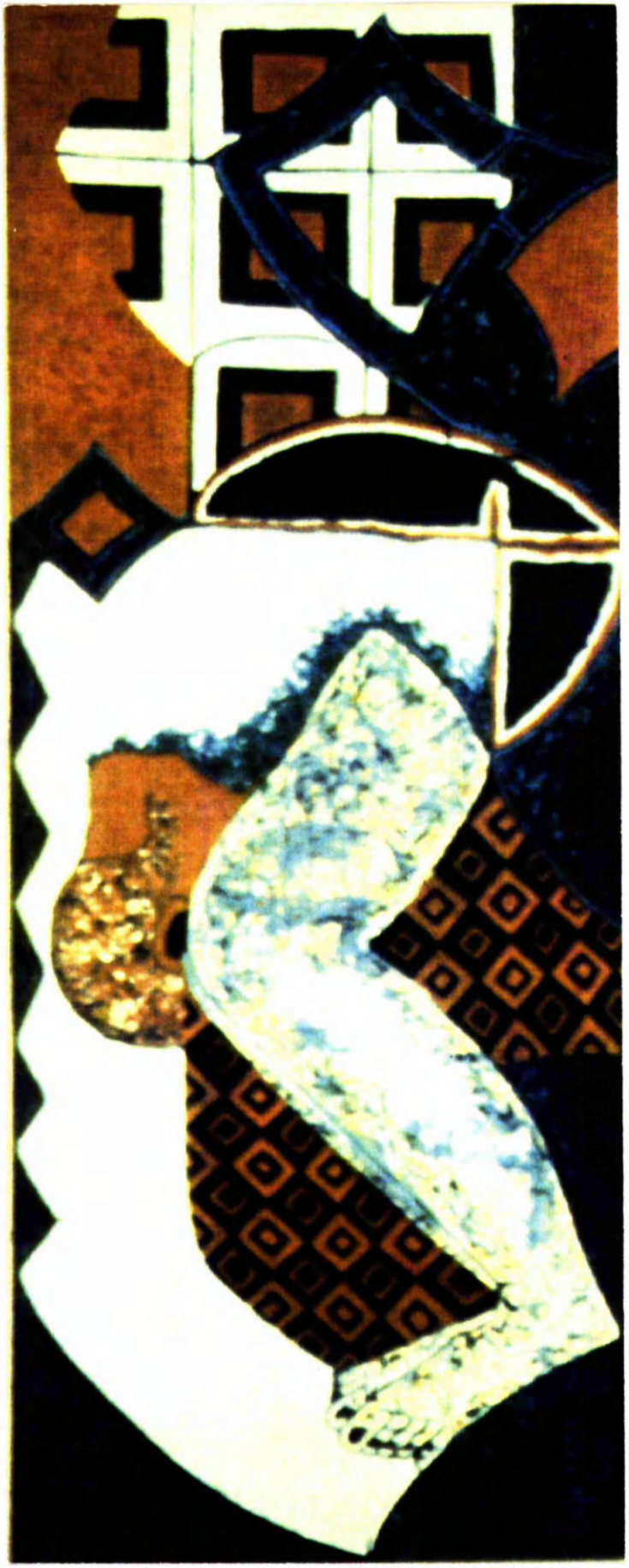
30. Egonu, "Faith", oil on canvas, 1967.

31. Egonu, "The End of a Sheep", oil on canvas, 1967.

32. Egonu, "End of a Tree", oil on canvas, 1967.

33. Egonu, "Two Fighting Cocks", oil on canvas, 1967.

34. Egonu, "Death of an Elephant", oil on canvas, 1968.

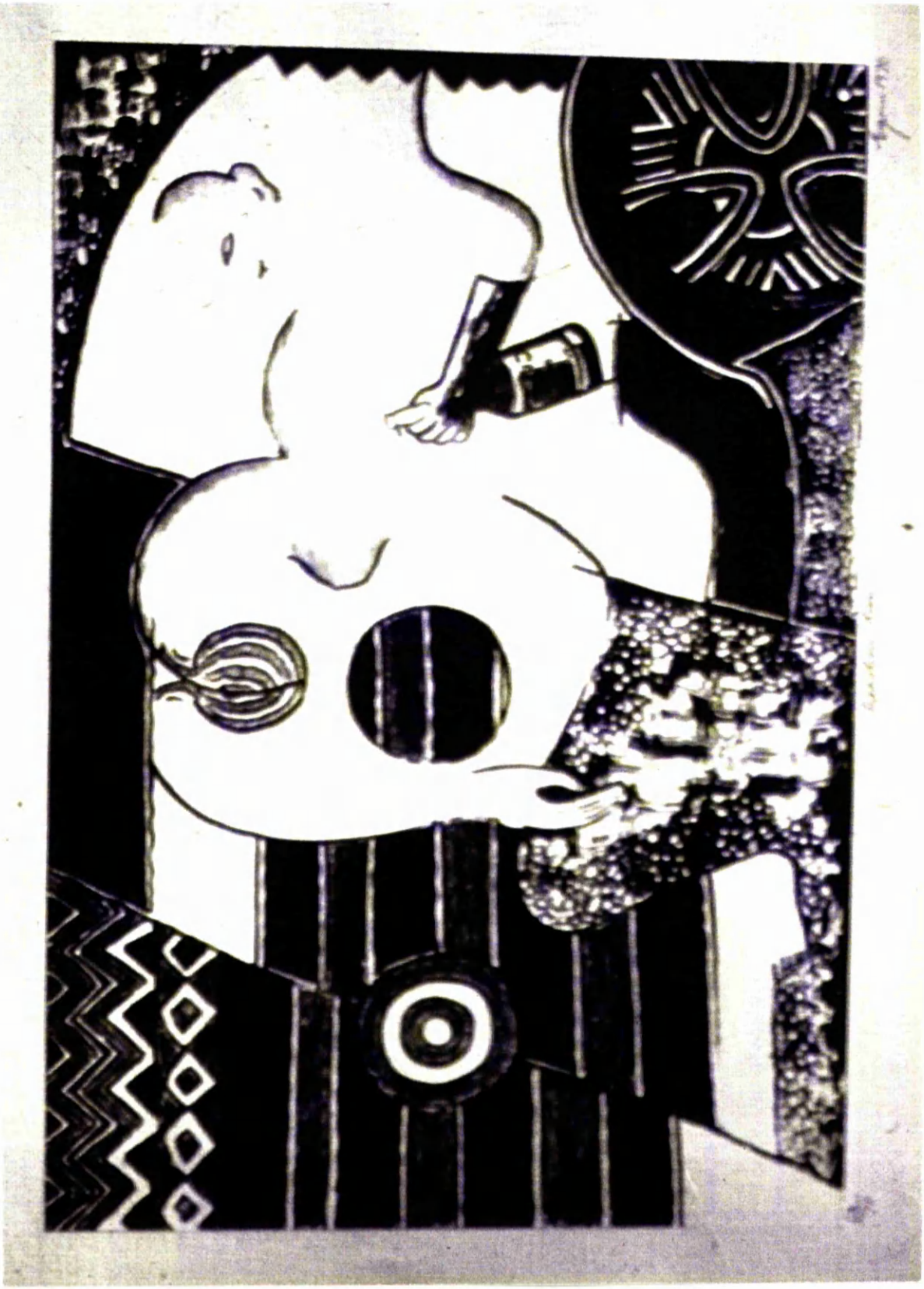


36. Egonu, "Woman in Grief", oil on canvas, 1968.

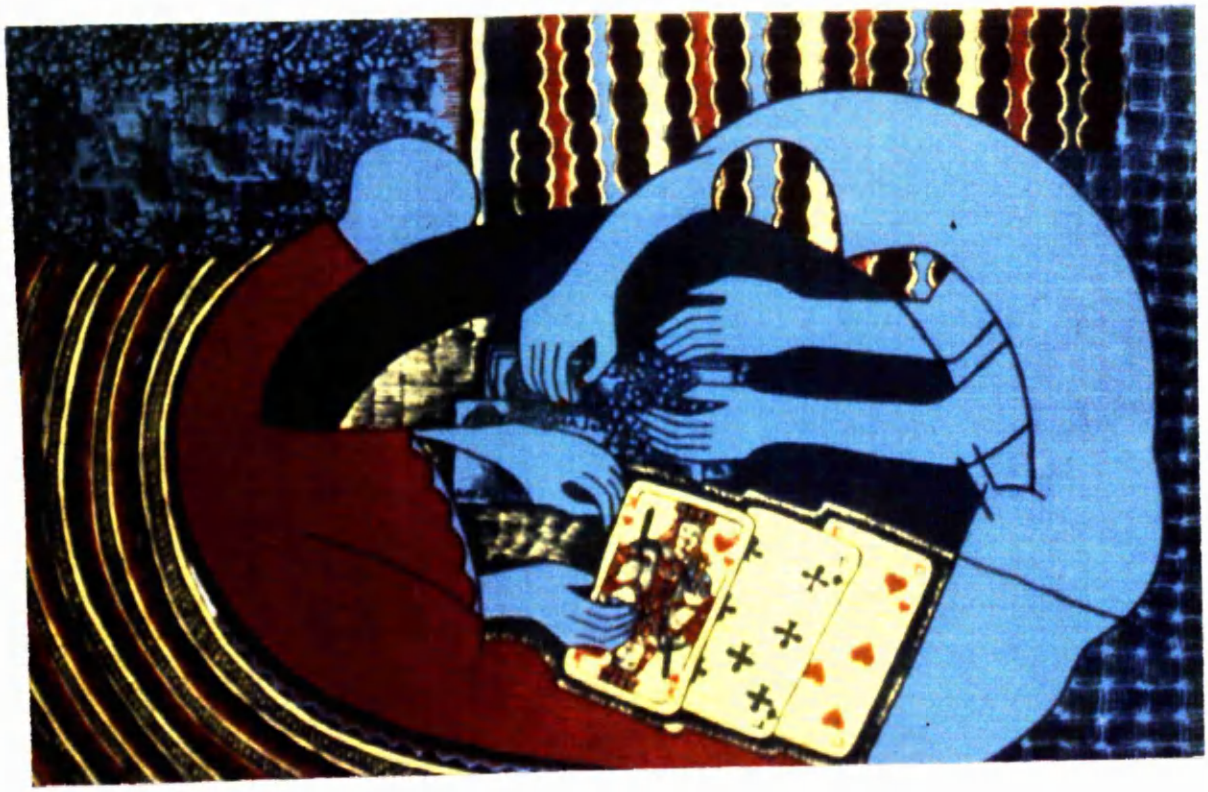
37. Egonu, "Nude Woman", oil on canvas, 1969.

38. Egonu, "Exodus", oil on canvas, 1970.

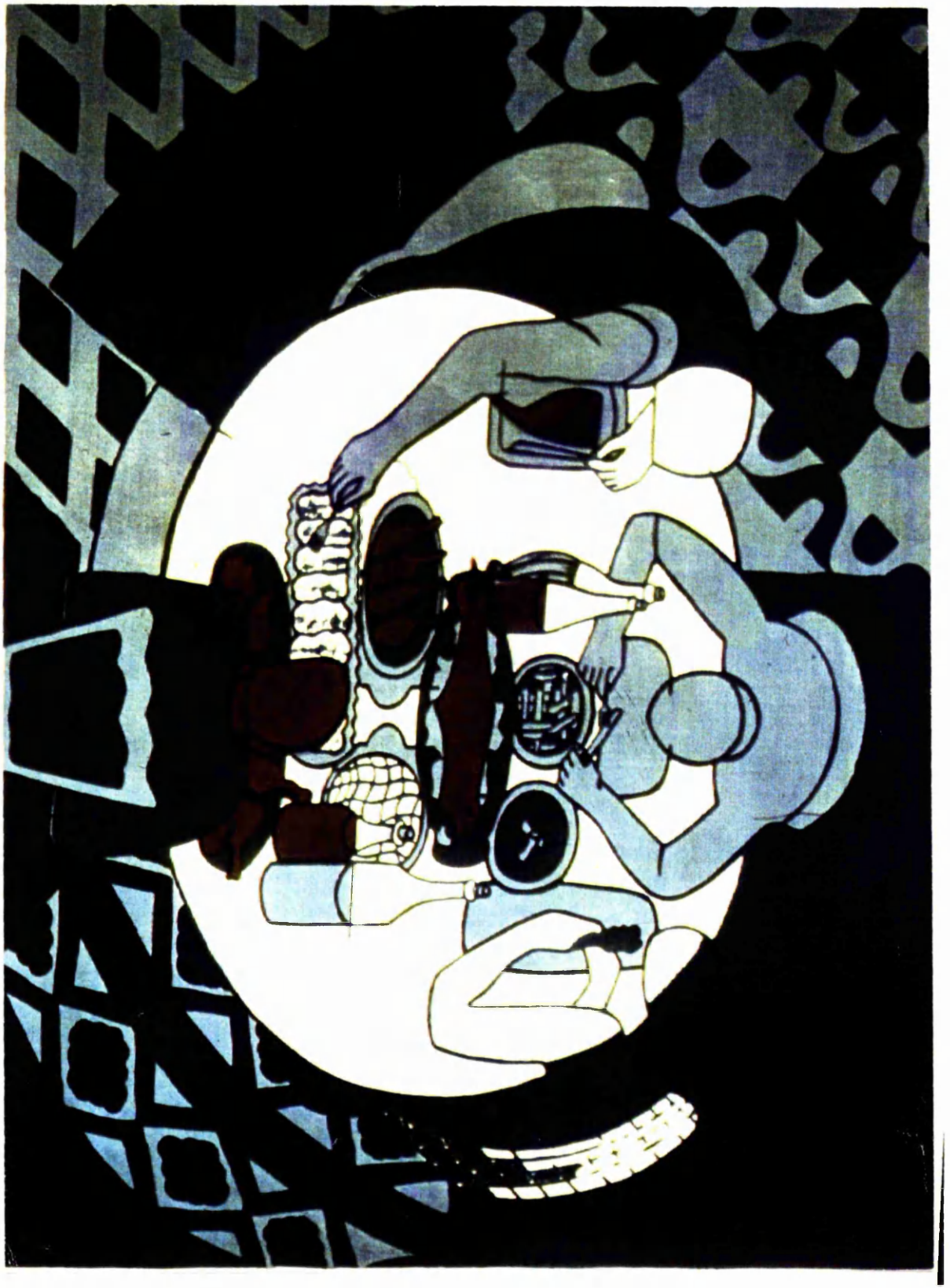
39. Egonu, "Addiction One", lithograph, 1970.



40. Egonu, "Addiction Two", lithograph, 1970.



41. Egonu, "Addiction Three", lithograph, 1970.



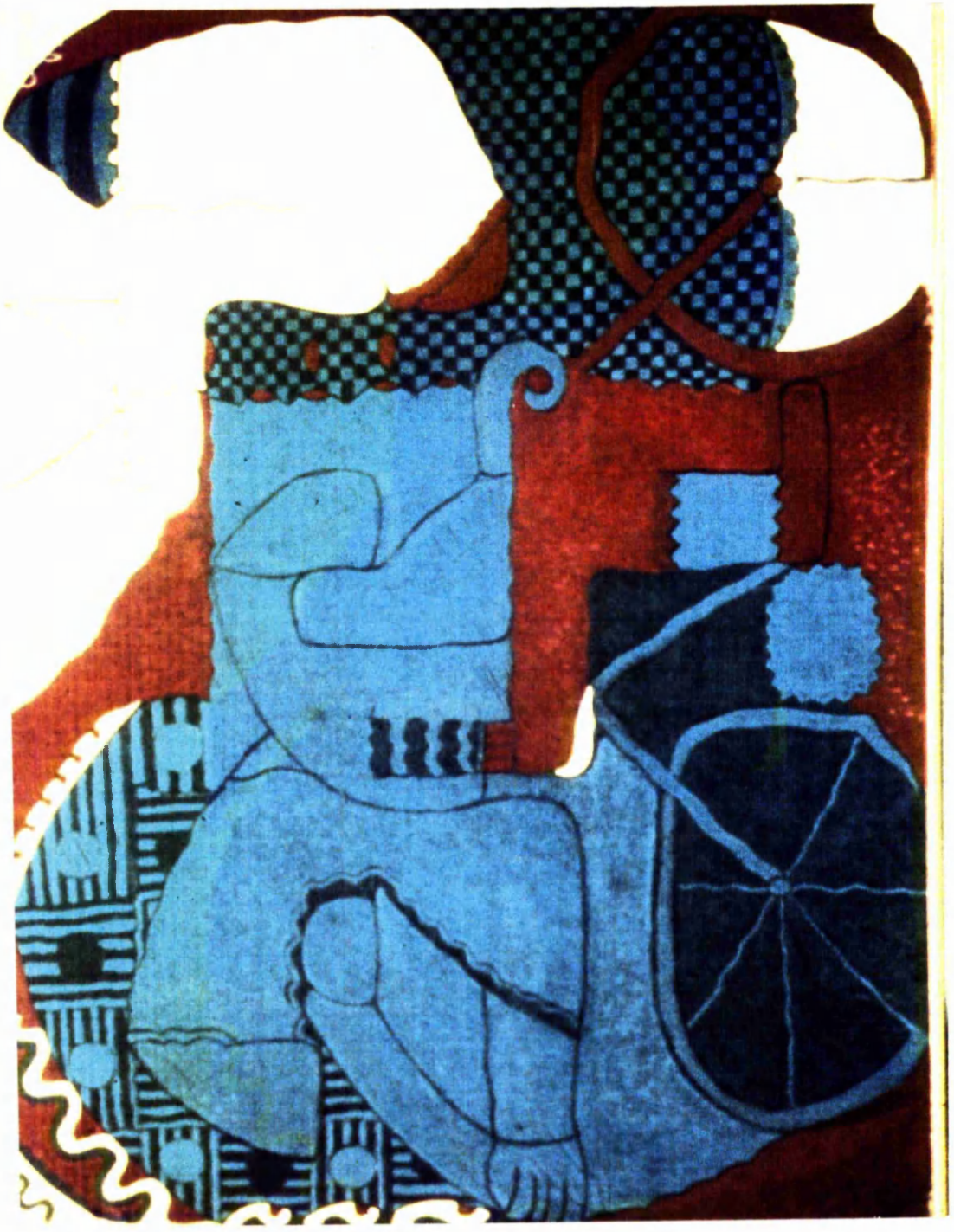
42. Egonu, "Addiction Five", lithograph, 1970.

43. Egonu, "Addiction Four", lithograph, 1970.

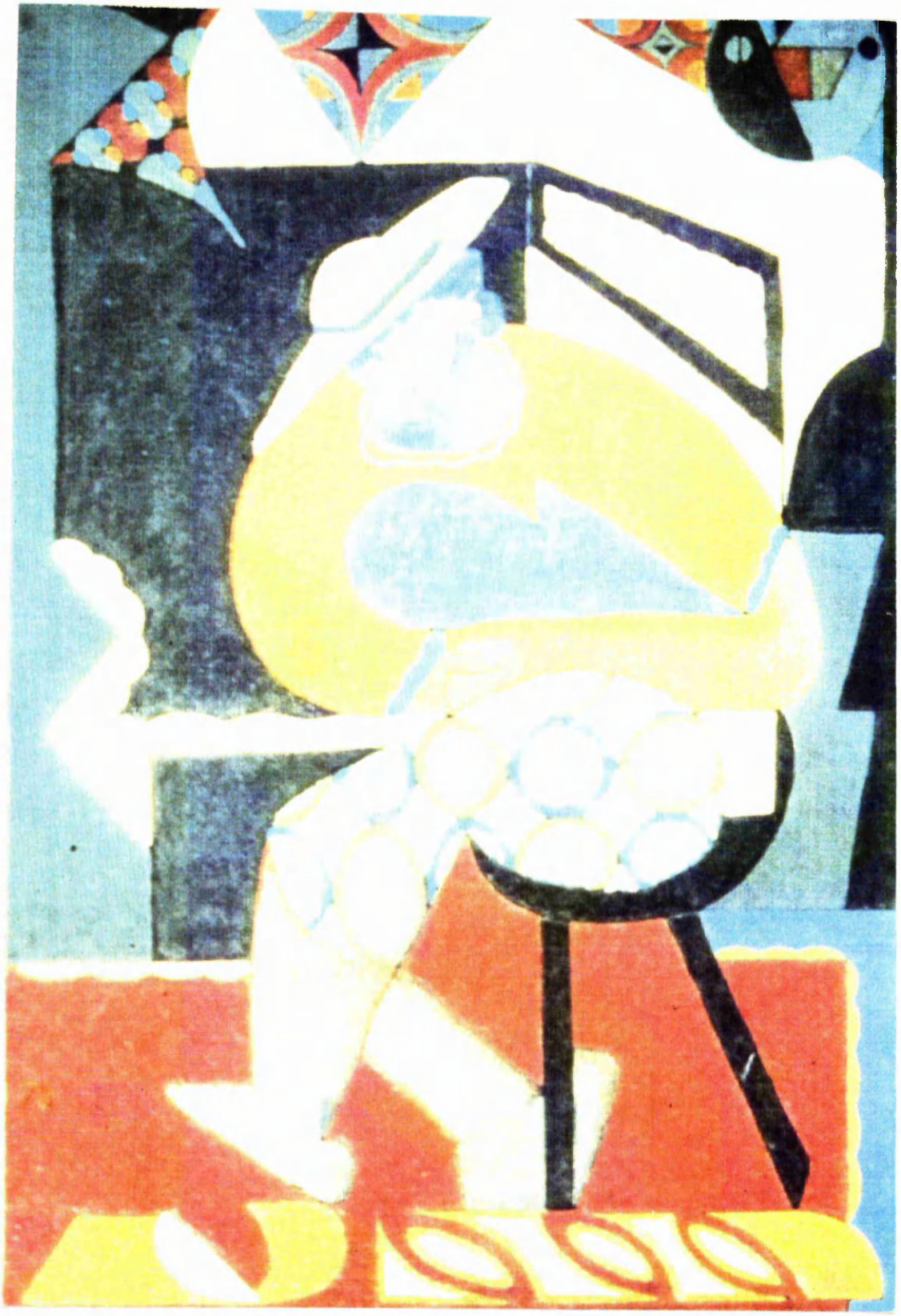
44. Egonu, "War and Peace No. 4", oil on canvas, 1972.

45. Egonu, "War and Peace No. 8", oil on canvas, 1972.

46. Egonu, "First Return after the Exodus", oil on canvas, 1974.



47. Egonu, "Second Return after Exodus", oil on canvas, 1974.



48. Egonu, "Woman in her Favourite Attire", oil on canvas, 1978.

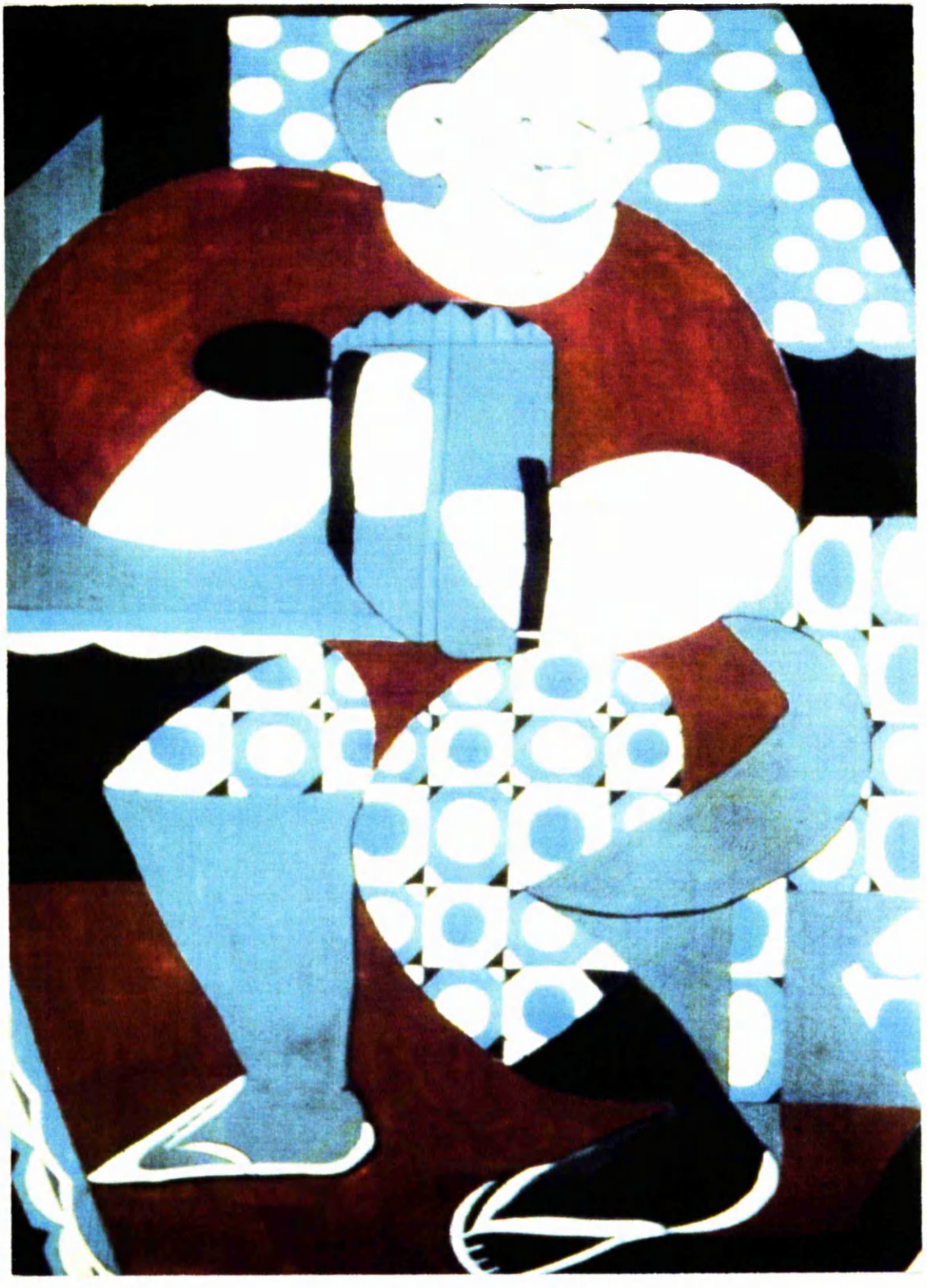
49. Egonu, "Woman Reading", oil on canvas, 1978.

50. Egonu, "Priestess of the Goddess of Lightning and Thunder", oil on canvas, 1978.

51. Egonu, "Priest of the Shrine of the Earth Goddess", oil on canvas, 1978.

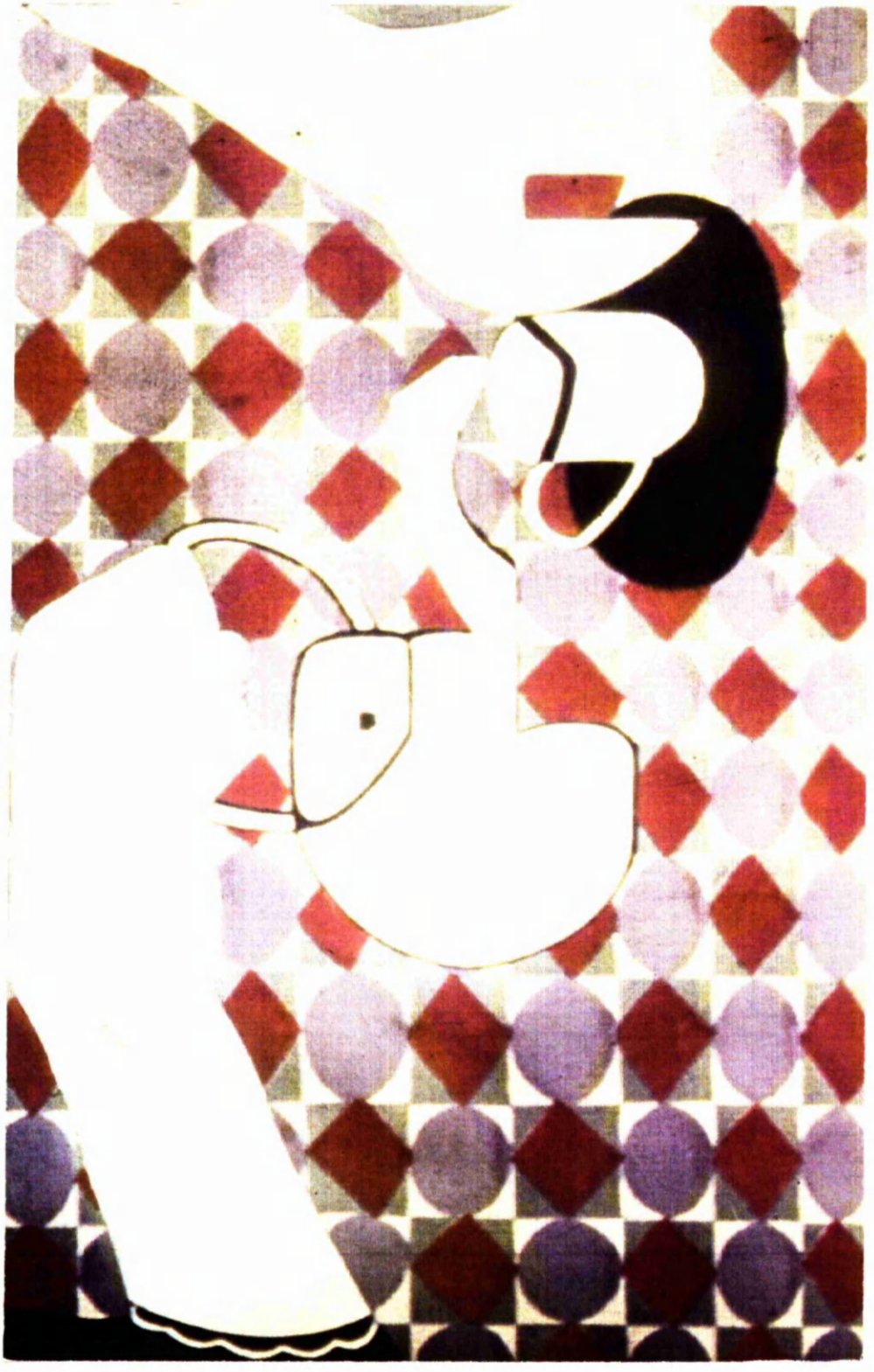
52. Egonu, "Lone Eater", gouache on paper, 1979.

53. Egonu, "Flambouyant Poet", oil on canvas, 1979.



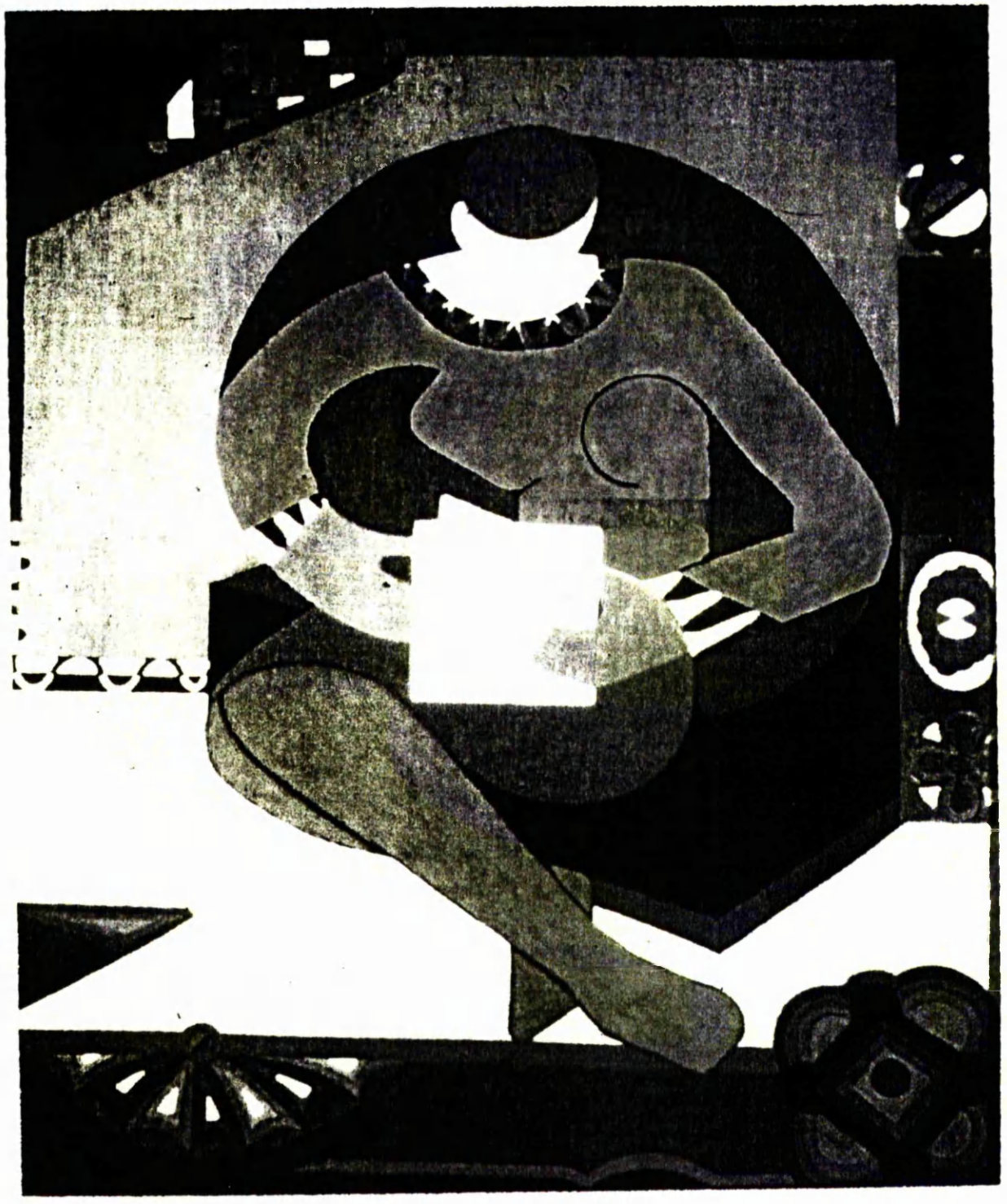
54. Egonu, "Concertina Player", gouache on paper, 1979.

55. Egonu, "Mending", gouache on paper, 1979.

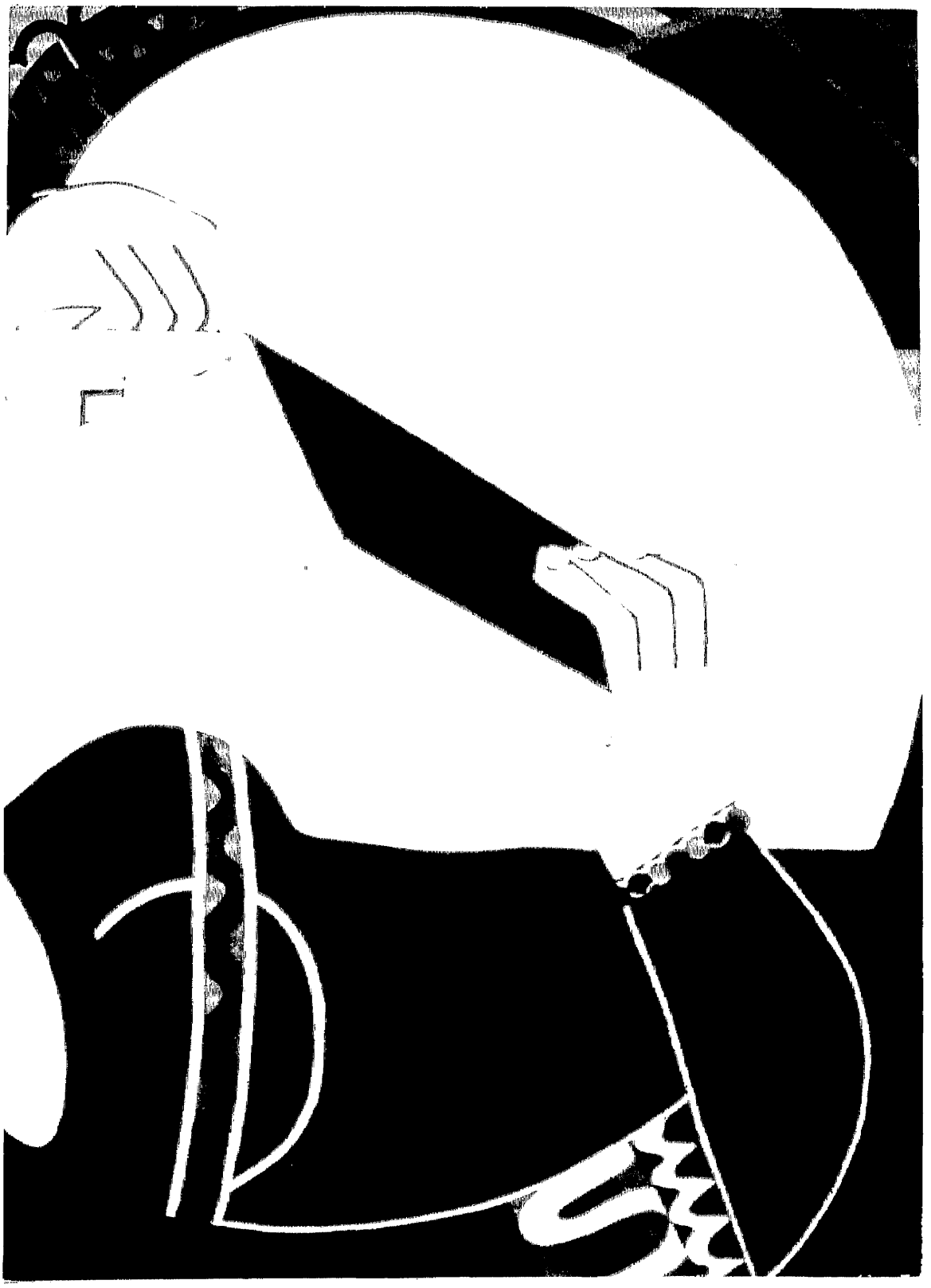


56. Egonu, "Coffee Time", gouache on paper, 1979.

57. Egonu, "Painter at Work", gouache on paper, 1979.



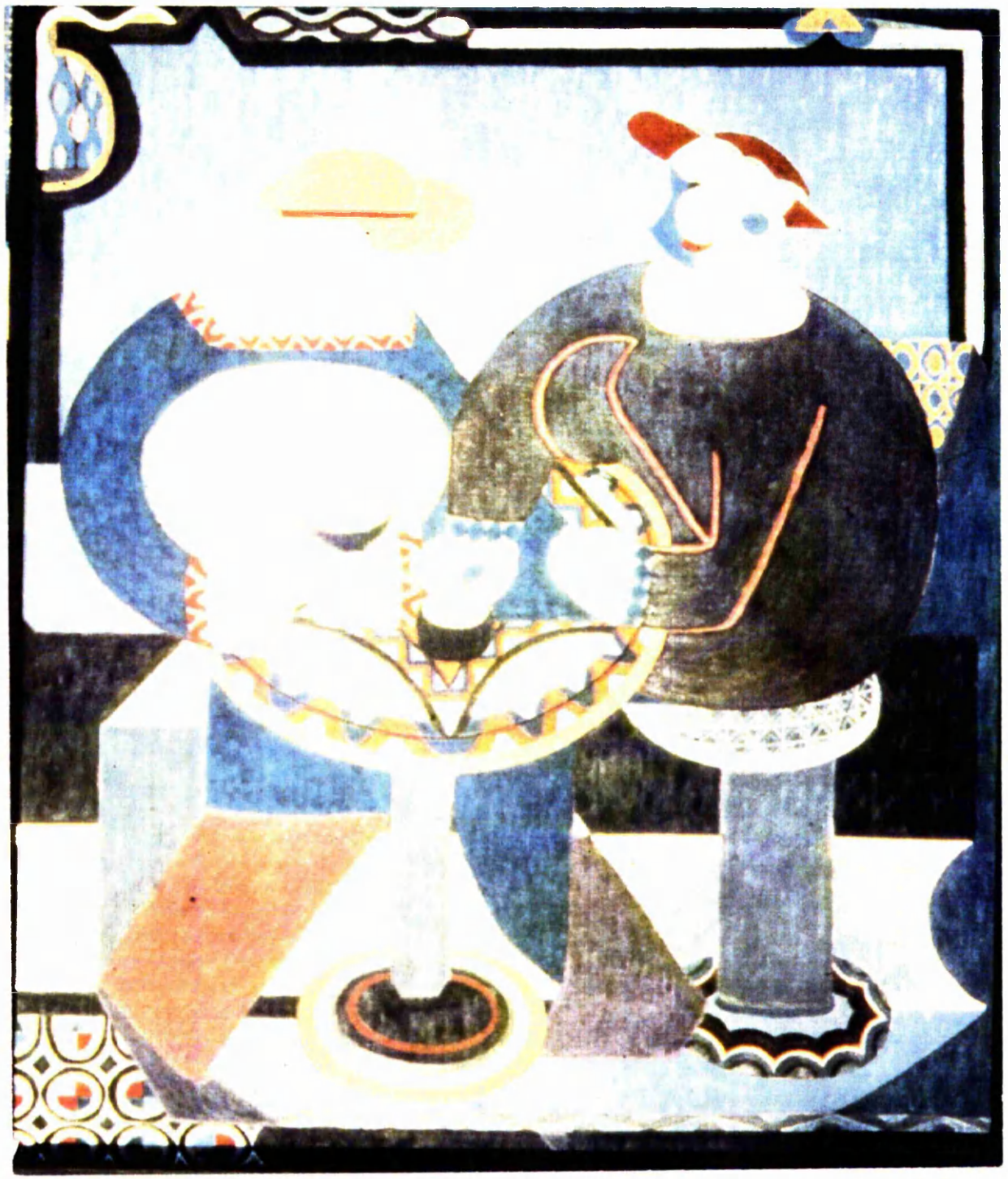
58. Egonu, "Woman Resting", oil on canvas, 1980.



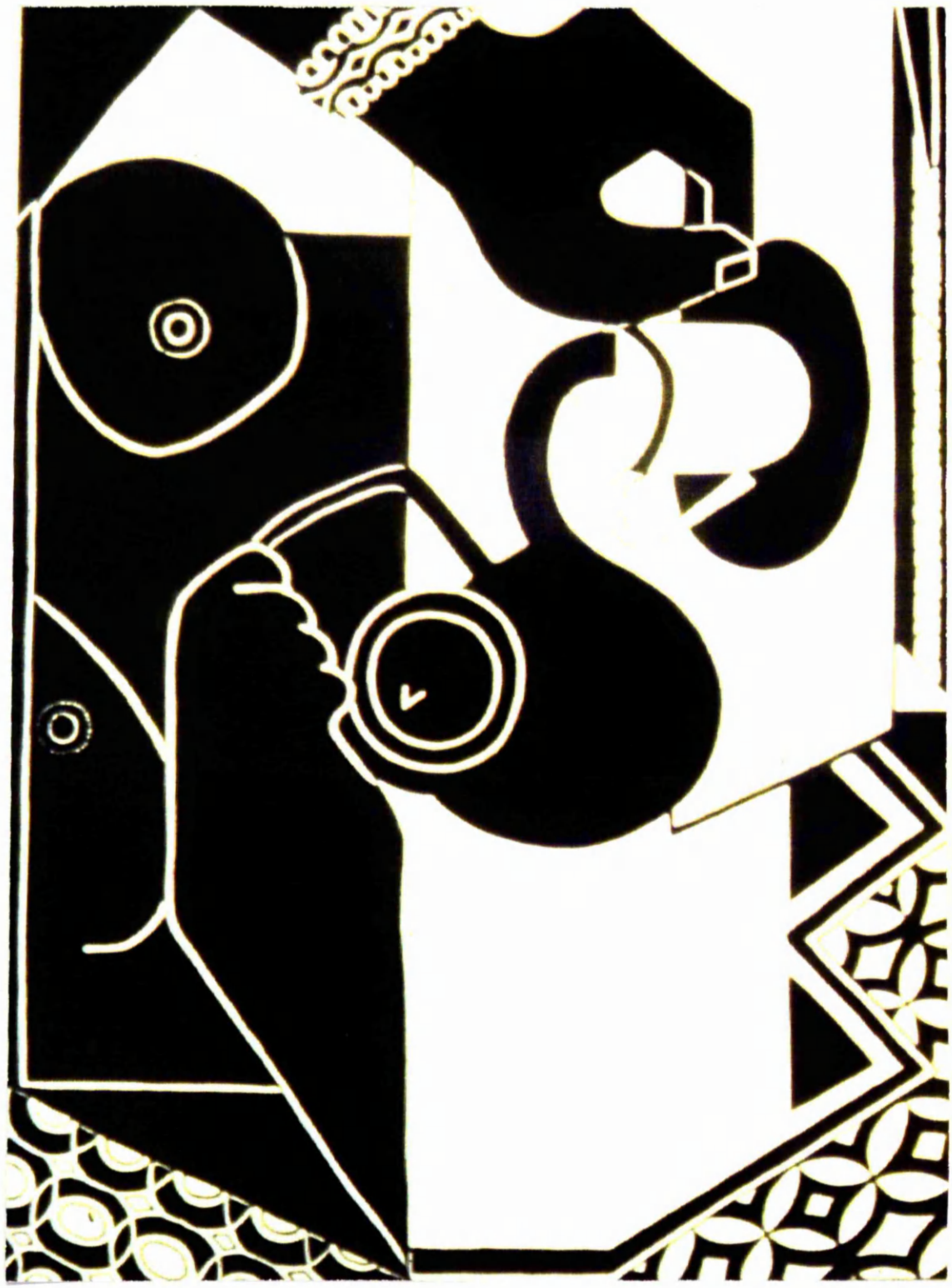
59. Egonu, "Reading", gouache on paper, 1980.

60. Egonu, "Lone Player", gouache on paper, 1980.

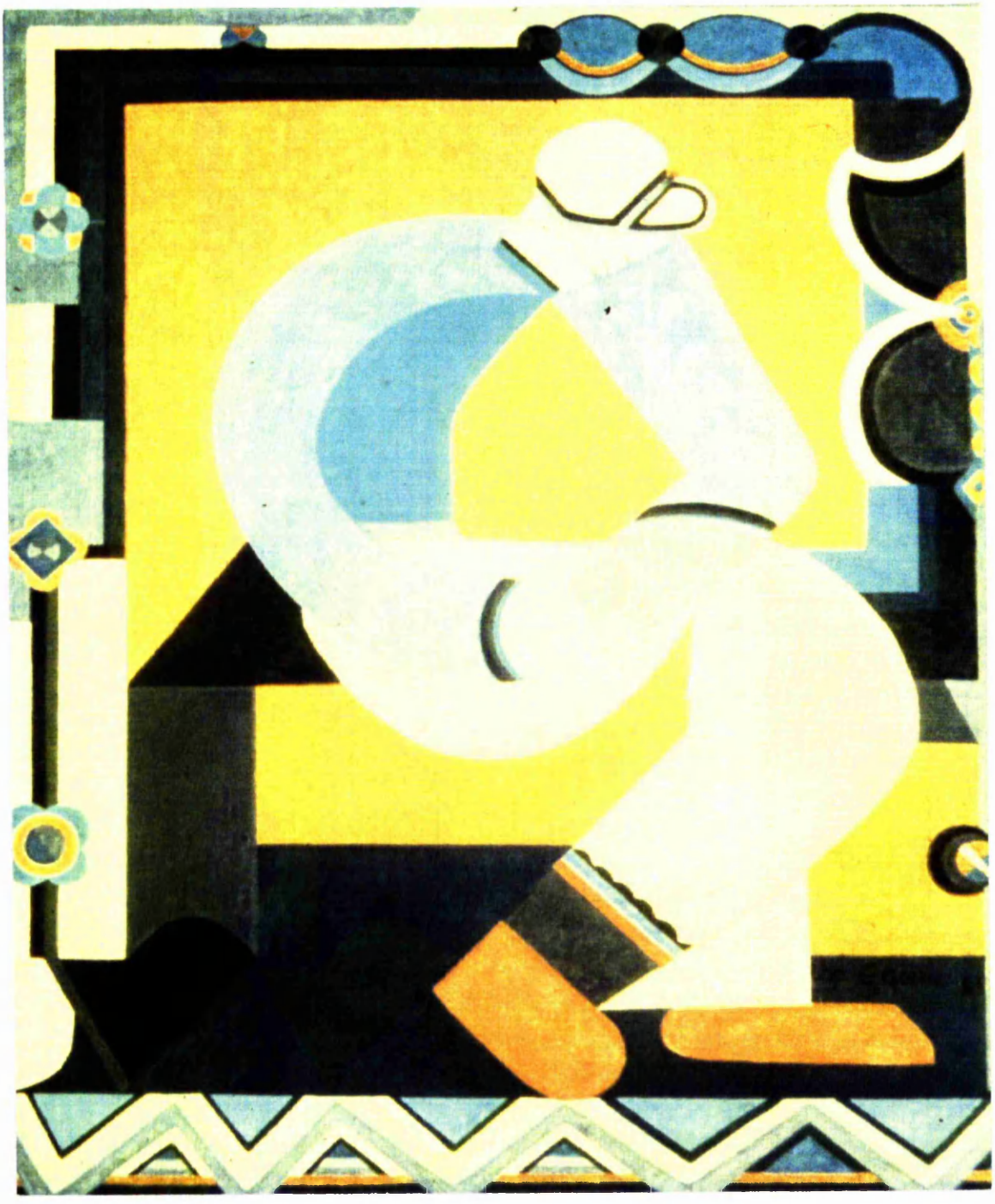
61. Egonu, "Tasting", gouache on paper, 1980



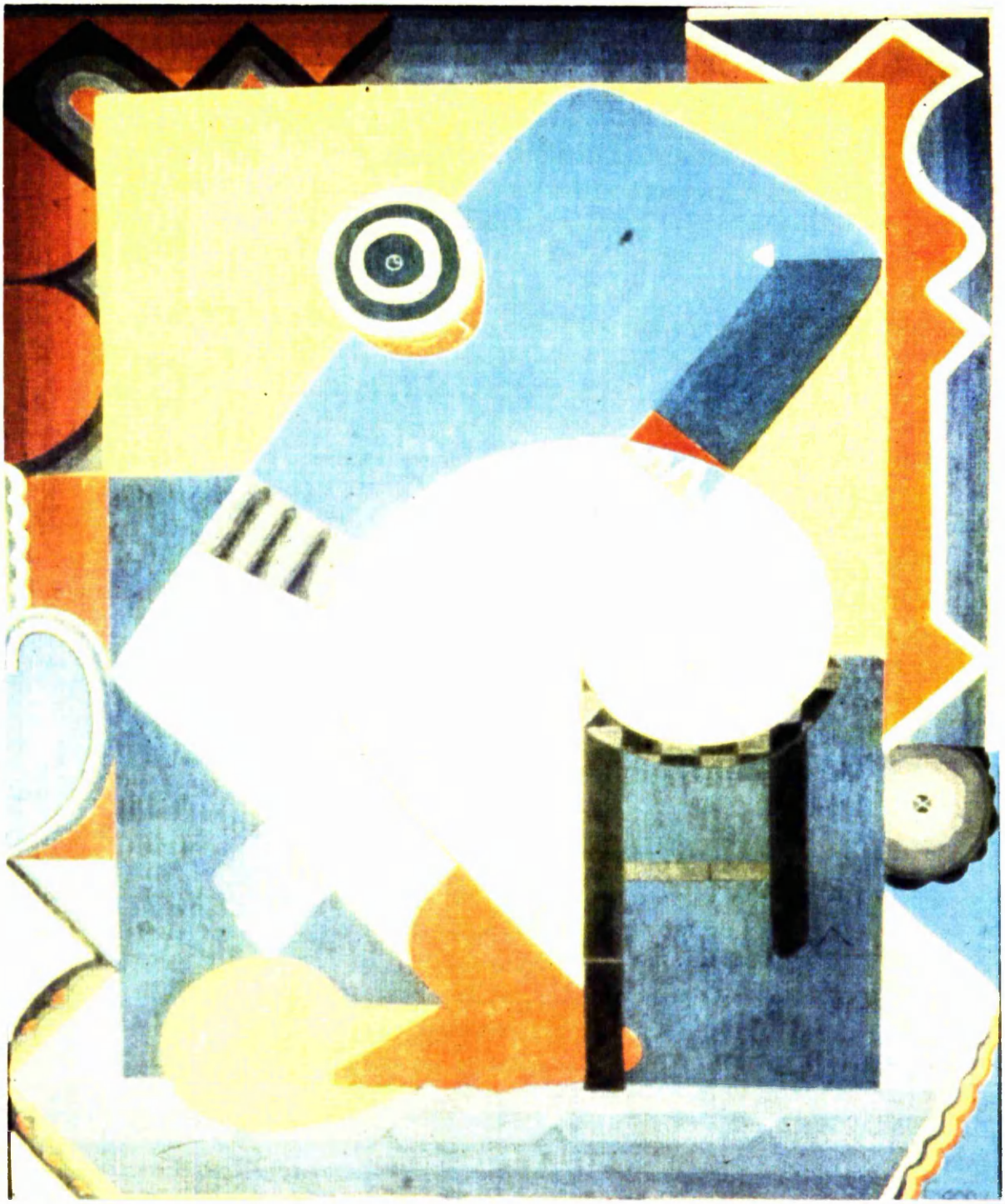
62. Egonu, "Coffee House at Bad Orb", oil on canvas, 1980.



63. Egonu, "A Cup of Coffee in Solitude", screenprint, 1981.



64. Egonu, "Stateless People: Musician", oil on canvas, 1981.



65. Egonu, "Stateless People: Artist", oil on canvas, 1981.

66. Egonu, "Stateless People: An Assembly", oil on canvas, 1982.

67. Egonu, "A Letter", gouache on paper, 1982.

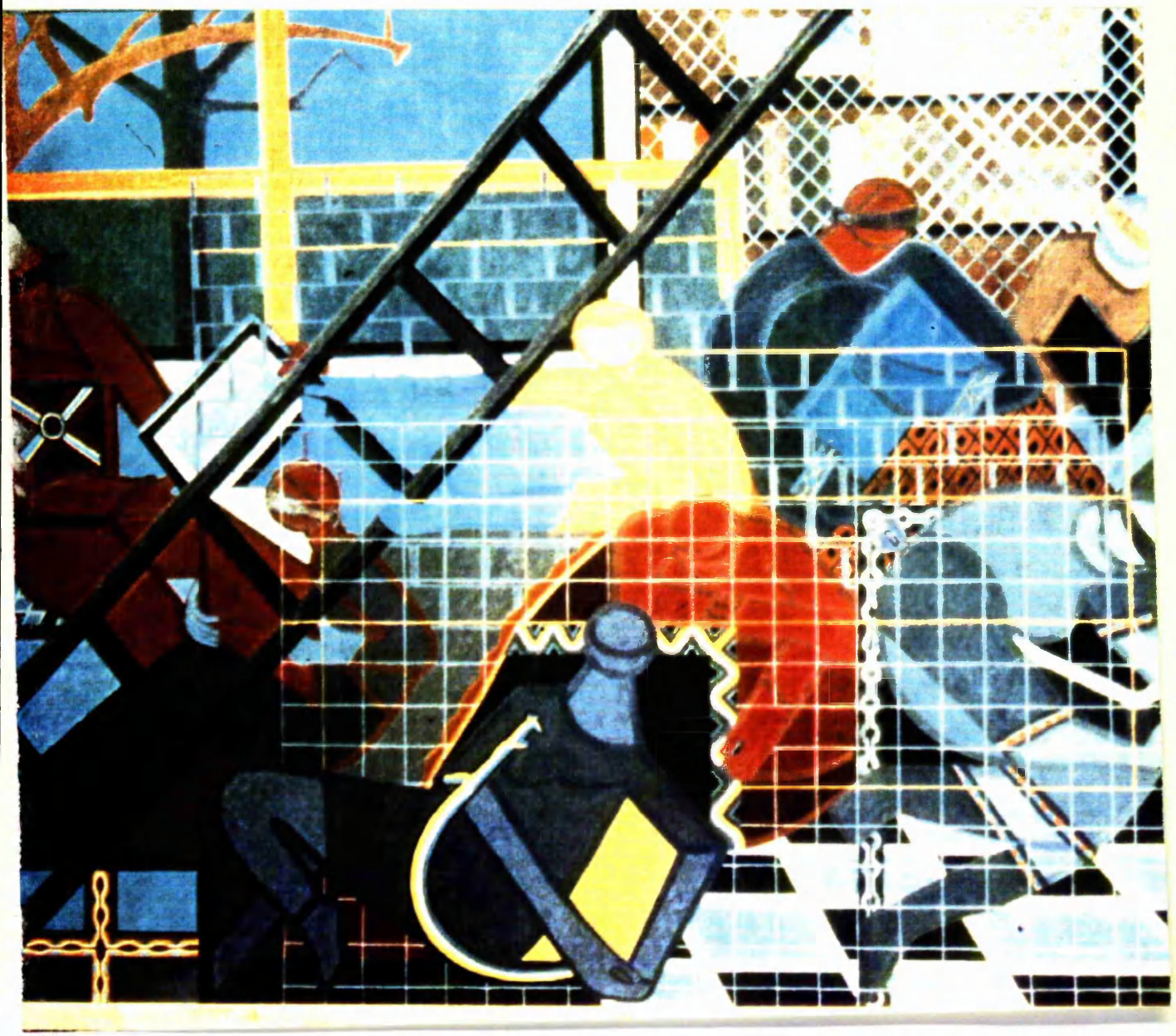
68. Egonu, "A Letter", gouache on paper, 1982.

69. Egonu, "The Four Seasons - Spring", gouache on paper, 1982.

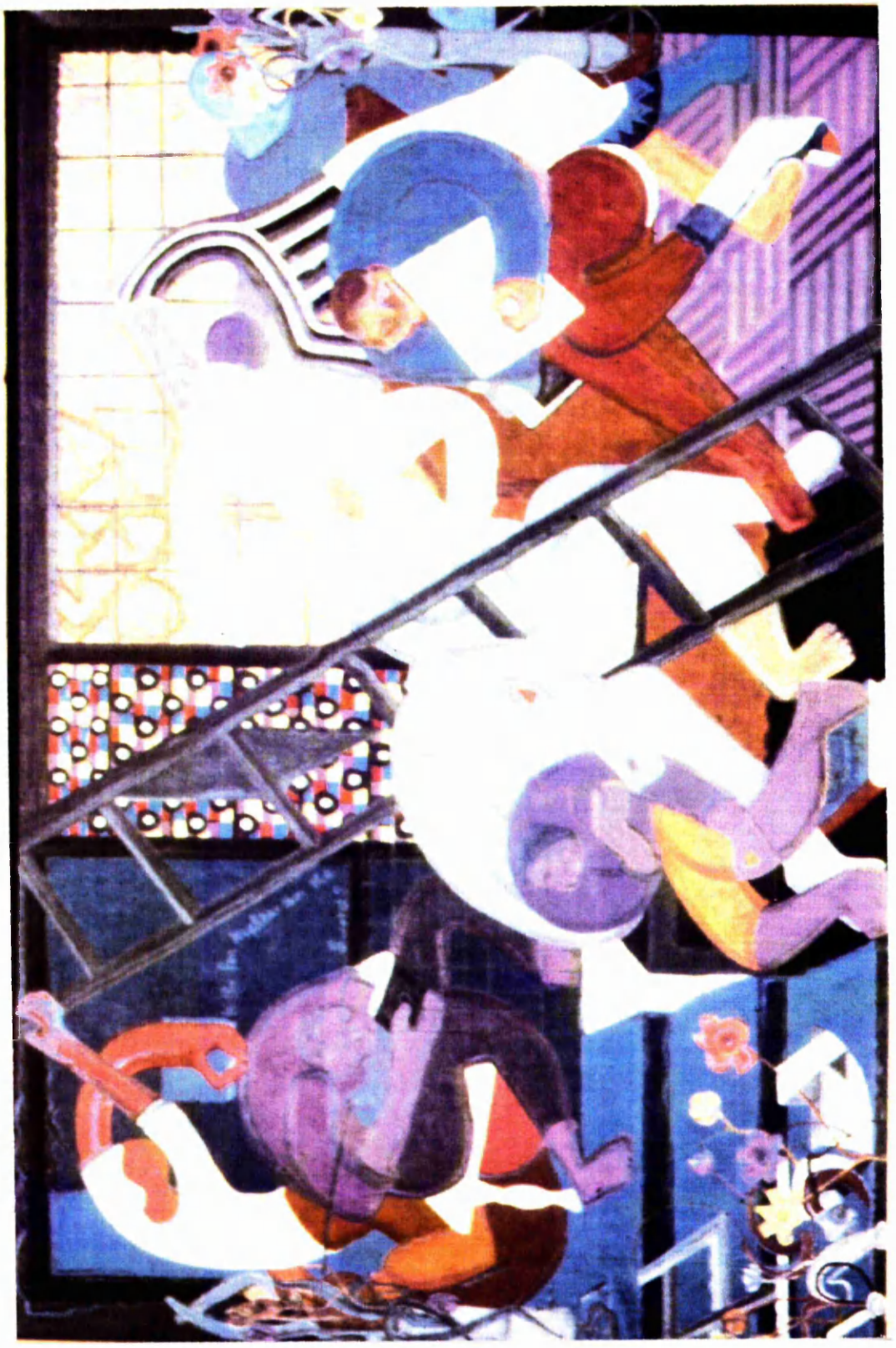
70. Egonu, "The Four Seasons - Summer", gouache on paper, 1982.

71. Egonu, "The Four Seasons - Autumn", gouache on paper, 1982.

72. Egonu, "The Four Seasons - Winter", gouache on paper, 1982.



73. Egonu, "Will Knowledge Safeguard Freedom? 1st", oil on canvas, 1984-85.

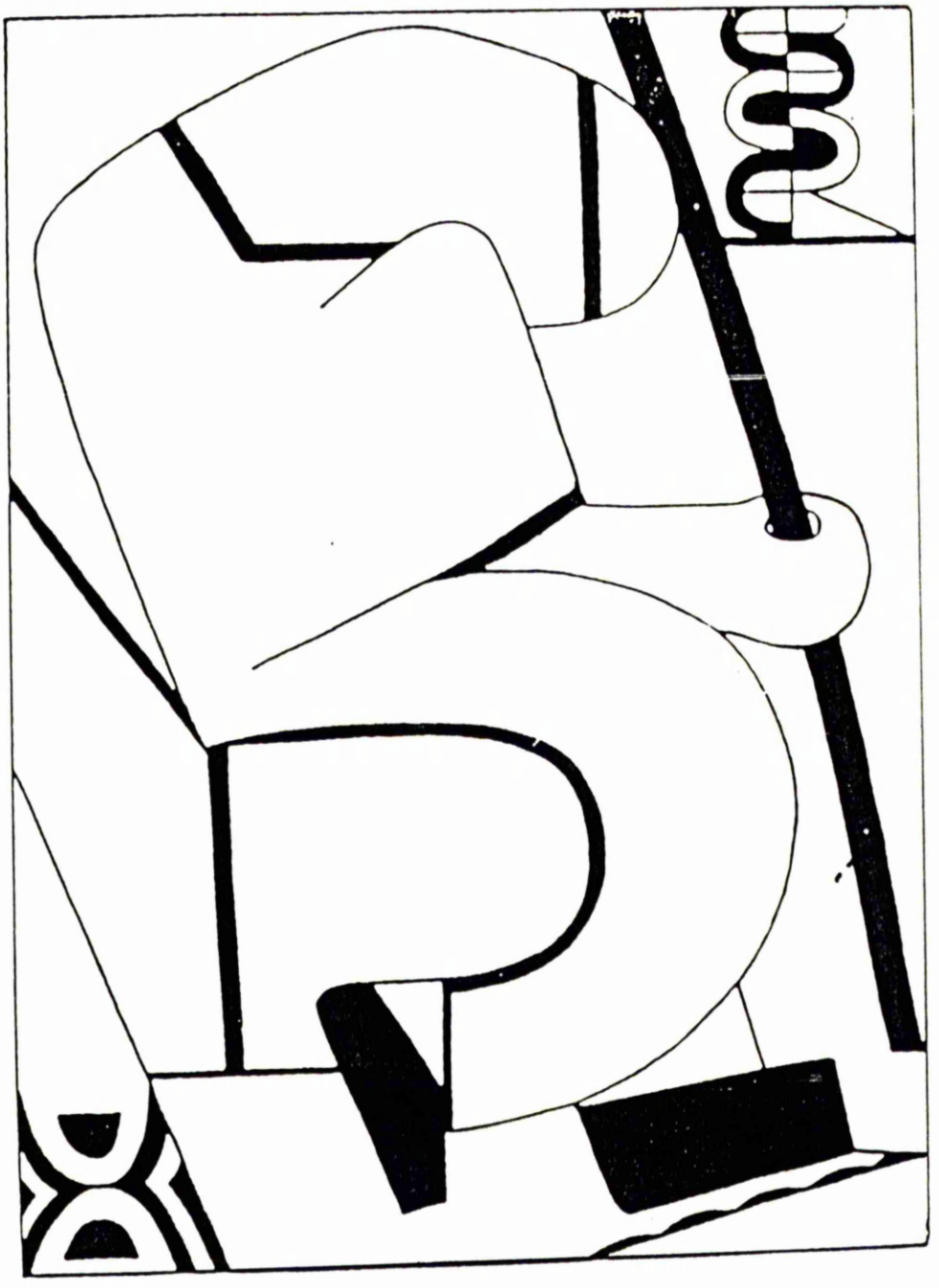


74. Egonu, ""Will Knowledge Safeguard Freedom? 2nd", oil on canvas, 1986.

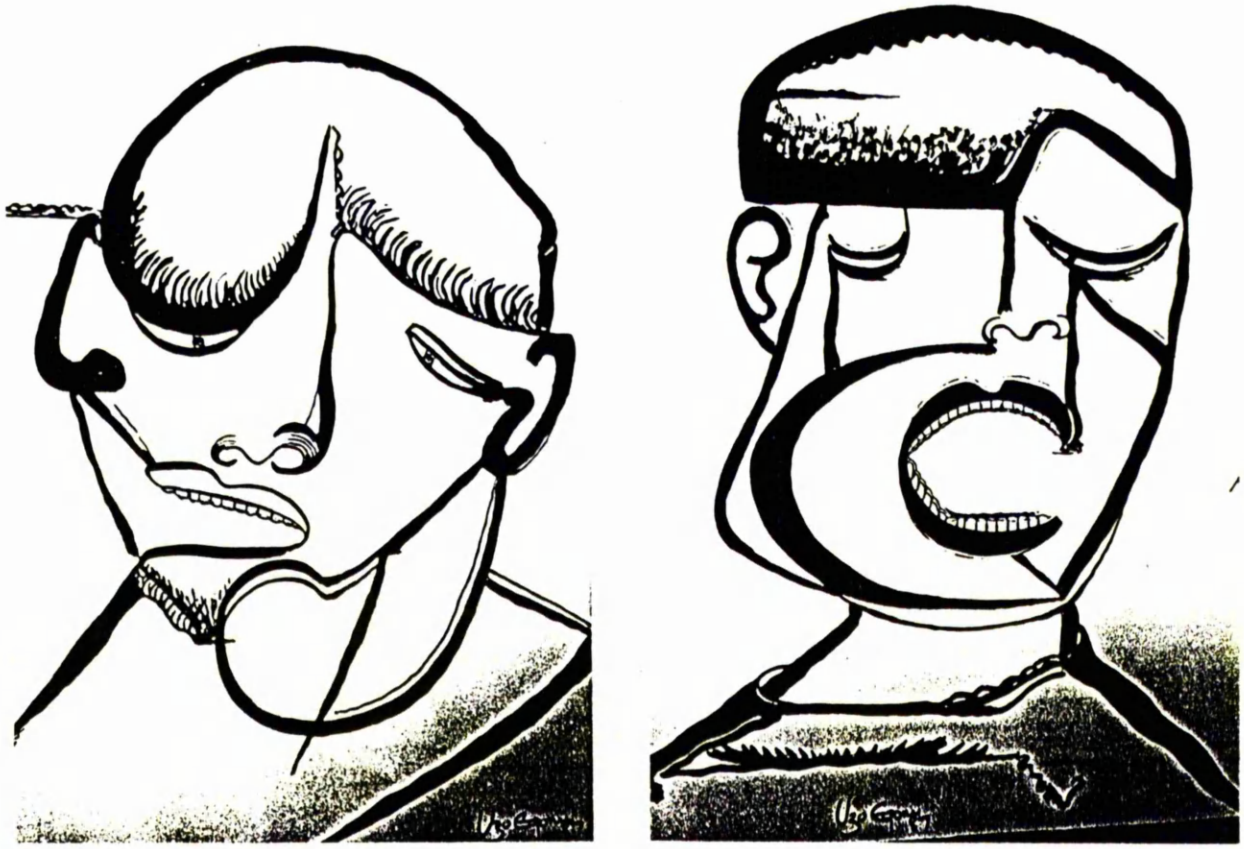
75. Egonu, "Will Knowledge Safeguard Freedom? 3rd", oil on canvas, 1986.

76. Egonu, "Will Knowledge Safeguard Freedom? 4th", oil on canvas, 1986.

77. Egonu, "Will Knowledge Safeguard Freedom? 8th", oil on canvas, 1986.



78. Egonu, "Man with Stick", black ink on paper?



79. Egonu, Paper sketches for *A New Lease of Life*, black ink on paper, 1987.

80. Egonu, "Will Knowledge Safeguard Freedom? 6th", oil on canvas, 1987.

81. Egonu, "Self Portrait", oil on canvas, 1989.